

伝説の勇者の伝説 8

行方知れずの恩知らず

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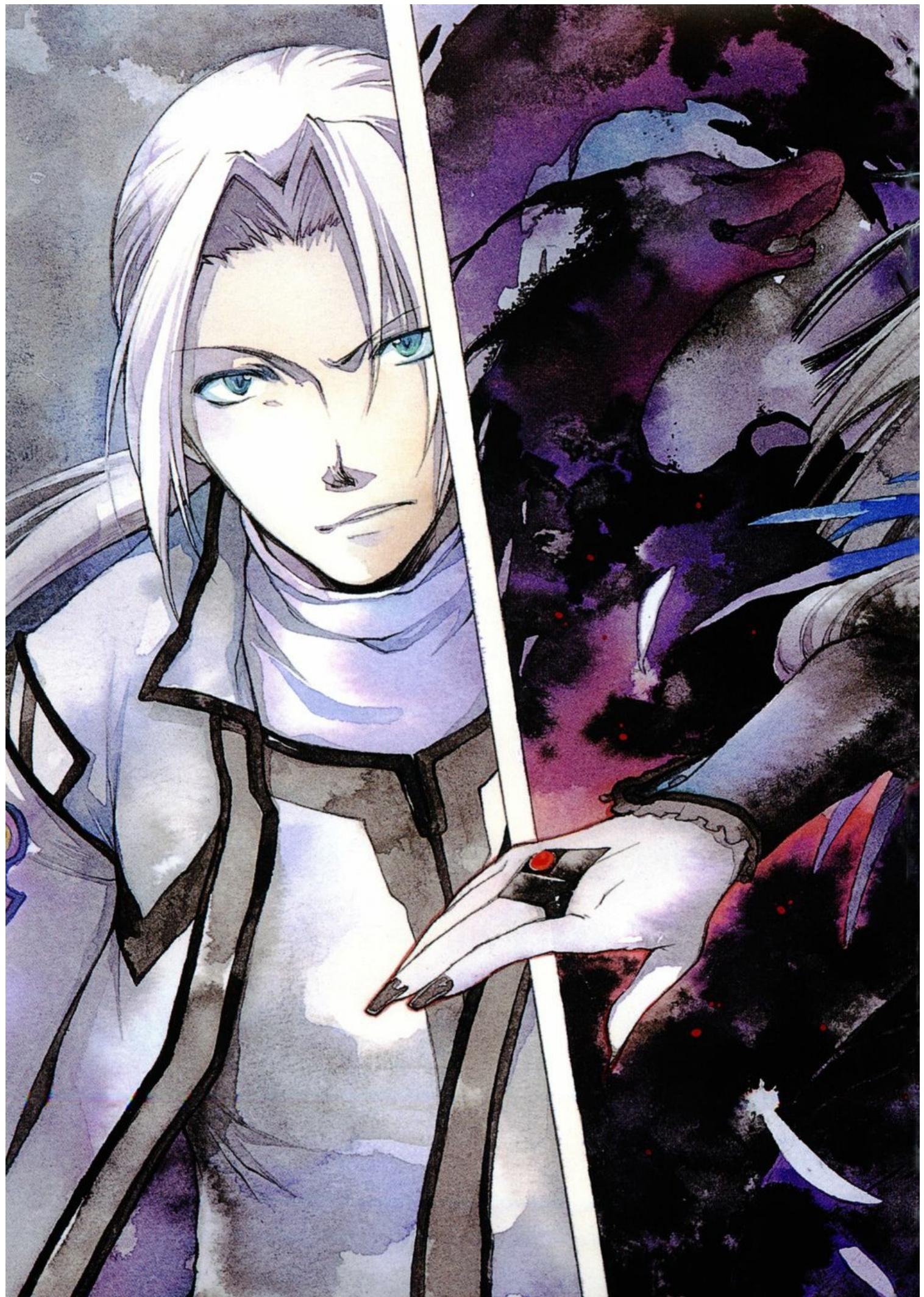
イラスト とよた瑣織

「俺の手が、おまえに届かない理由はもう、知ってるんだ……」
小さく言つて、シオソは再び自分の手の平を見た。



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行方知れずの恩知らず





「聞よ……有れ
刹那。
フロードの足下の影が、
膨れあがり始める！」

ライナは、もう一度だけ背後を振り返った。
気が遠くなるほどそれは、遙かかなたに感じられて……



Epilogue 1: A structure overwhelmed by despair

It was terribly dark.

Wrapping itself all around him, it was terribly dark.

He couldn't see anything anymore.

He couldn't hear anything anymore.

He reached out.

So that someone would save him, he reached out.

But his hand couldn't reach anywhere.

There, in that darkness, he couldn't see even his hand.

"... Just when did I..."

When did I come here without realizing it?

Sion Astal looked around.

He was in the throne room.

In the heart of Roland.

But nothing was there.

People called him the Hero King.

But to him, that was absolutely nothing.

His mother had once said,

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Sion."

However, he shook his head.

I'm afraid.

I'm afraid, Mother.

Because of me, people die.

Because of me, people live.

Due to that fear, the weak me trembles every day.

He cried out for help.

Drowning in the darkness, he cried out for help.

But that voice wouldn't reach anyone.

Still, his mother's words continued.

"You grew up to be a kind child."

But kindness alone wouldn't save anyone.

The world was far, far darker than he'd thought.

Kindness alone... wouldn't save anything.

Nevertheless, he wanted to save them.

I want to move forward already, he thought.

Reflected in his eyes were countless things to be saved.

He wanted to save even just a few of the weak who cried out.

And then, this darkness.

At some point, this darkness came into the palm of his hands.

And...

His mother's voice went on.

"So even if I'm not here... you aren't alone."

At that.

Sion smiled.

"... You're wrong, Mother. I'm not kind... and that's why I'm alone..."

The only thing he could hold onto was darkness.

Deep darkness.

His hand that was held out as if to grab onto that darkness... He looked at that hand.

His hand that he'd set out to save everything.

The arm I held out to change this mad world.

To protect the people important to me.

To see the smiling faces of the people important to me.

For those important to me.

But the result was...

"....."

What was the result of that?

He gently closed his eyes.

Then *his* face arose in his mind.

That careless face that always looked as if it'd given up on everything.

A sadly smiling expression.

Ryner Lute's face.

In his memories, Ryner looked at Sion and spoke.

"You gave Luke Stokkart the duty..."

His words ended there.

But he knew what the rest was.

Sion gave Luke Stokkart the duty of *Ryner Lute's erasure*....

The erasure of the **Alpha Stigma** monster, Ryner Lute.

How—how did Ryner know?

How did you...

When Sion looked at Ryner, Ryner only looked at him with an expression that said that he already understood everything.

An eternally sad expression.

An expression that looked as if it'd even given up on life.

Utterly.

Utterly, it was if he heard a voice in his heart.

"Ah, it's just as I thought?"

That scream.

"You also think of me..."

His heart's scream.

But, but that,

"... That's not it,"

Sion managed to say.

But Ryner's expression didn't change.

"You also think of me as a monster, don't you?"

That's not it!

Something like that...

I don't think anything like that!

He cried out.

I don't think you're a monster!

He cried out.

Despite that, Ryner merely smiled sadly.

"Neither of you... Neither of you are to blame. I liked you both."

His face, always filled with despair.

The despair that was locked away within him.

And Ryner disappeared.

Before Sion, he disappeared in an instant.

He couldn't do anything.

Back then, Sion couldn't do anything.

That was why,

"....."

Sion held out his hand.

Even though it'd already reached this point, he held out his hand in order to restrain Ryner.

He held out his hand as if to hold onto the Ryner in his memories.

Perhaps there might still be time.

If he held out his hand, there might still be time.

That was why Sion desperately, desperately held out his hand...

But that hand didn't reach Ryner at all.

"... No."

Sion then opened his eyes.

"... I already know why my hand won't reach you..."

Quietly saying that, he again looked at the palm of his hand.

Once before, he'd held that hand out to Ryner and said this.

"Cooperate with me, Ryner. Together we'll change this country."

Together.

Together we'll change this country.

At those words.

"Ha... haha—"

Without thinking, Sion let a dry voice leak out.

That was nothing but a farce.

A mad farce.

He was the one who held out his hand, and he was the one who destroyed things.

"....."

Together we'll change this country, he'd said.

Then on the other hand, he gave out an order to kill Ryner.

Should the Alpha Stigma bearer, Ryner Lute, go berserk outside of Roland or show any traitorous behaviour— Erase him...

That was the order Sion gave Luke.

But that...

"... I... don't think of Ryner as a monster."

Then all of a sudden.

"But you would kill him?"

Before him.

From within the darkness, there was a voice.

However, Sion didn't lift his head.

Because he knew what was there.

That voice spoke.

It was a clear and rather pretty voice.

"You would. That's correct."

"....."

However, Sion didn't answer.

Instead, quietly,

"... I don't think of him as a monster..."

"Ahahahahahahahahahahaha. Aren't you kind, Sion... but that's a trivial matter."

That's a trivial matter.

At that, Sion lifted his face and looked into the darkness.

Over there was something much worse than the darkness.

Greater than this darkness, like a dark spirit, something of malice was there.

That malice continued to speak.

"You advance forward only on the correct path. You're strong enough to even be able to trample over everything important to you, if you deemed it necessary. Friends. Loved ones. Everything. That is your nature alone. Now then, show me. The correct path..."

That malice continued to speak.

"Show me the path you will walk."

"....."

At that, Sion let out a light breath.

And again he tried to breathe in, but air wouldn't enter.

His breathing.

The air...

Instead, the only thing that entered was darkness.

"....."

Sion directed his gaze to the scattered documents on the floor.

Those were all the documents yielded by Luke Stokkart.

He stared at those documents.

"... I—"

He breathed out that darkness.

Chapter 1: White speculation, black speculation

"... And?"

Luke Stokkart quietly said.

Unsuitable for his still young age of twenty-five years, he had a calm and composed expression.

Gentle, light green eyes, and as if it'd lost all its colour, white hair.

Those calm eyes gazed into the darkness.

The back alley of the night.

While gazing into the darkness of that back alley where moonlight didn't reach,

"... Who was it that demanded that you all come for me?"

However.

"....."

From the still darkness, there was no answer.

Luke shrugged at that, and,

"If you don't wish to respond, it doesn't ma..."

He began, but then.

Something that was lurking in the darkness replied,

"... Milk Callaud is in our custody."

At those words.

Luke narrowed his eyes that were staring straight into the darkness.

And with a calm and composed voice,

"Hoh... and?"

Then six men appeared from within the darkness.

Without any sense of unity, each of them wore clothes that looked like they could've been sold anywhere...

"....."

From only the way they carried their feet, Luke knew immediately who they were.

They were likely soldiers who'd received training here in the Roland Empire.

Furthermore, they had a considerable amount of physical capabilities.

There was no pointless movement.

There were no openings.

And in a low, intimidating voice, one of them spoke.

".. You are to come with us, Luke Stokkart."

"Hmm. If I refuse?"

"... Milk Callaud's safety cannot be guaranteed."

Luke smiled wryly at that.

Their words.

The way they appeared.

After all, Luke... had predicted all of it.

Captain Milk's disappearance.

Luke had already realized it.

Earlier, when he'd paid her room a visit to ask if she'd like to play somewhere tomorrow, she wasn't there.

However, without obtaining permission from Luke and the others, she'd uncharacteristically gone out in the middle of the night like a misbehaving daughter.

She was diligent, brave, and kind...

No... W-Well, putting that aside...



It wasn't like her to go out in the middle of the night on her own initiative like that.

In addition to that, she and Luke had promised to train together tonight.

Nevertheless, she definitely wouldn't do something like break that promise without a word.

Thus, as to why she'd broken that promise and wasn't in her room, a few possibilities had come forth...

1 - She'd gotten caught up in some kind of accident.

However, that wasn't it. An adorable, honest, and good child like her who, in all honesty, possessed high capabilities...

No... Well, putting that aside again.

At any rate, judging from her true strength, it wasn't likely that she'd gotten into some kind of unforeseen accident.

In that case, the next possibility.

2 - That suspicious, unknown Ryner Lute had led her astray to somewhere.

This was... the most likely possibility.

The eternally cheerful, obedient, and intelligent Captain Milk only lost herself when it came to that man, Ryner Lute.

If she by chance saw him, she would go chasing after him... the chances of that weren't none...

"....."

But as he thought, that was unlikely.

Ryner Lute's whereabouts were always being obtained.

After all, that was Luke's true task.

In the middle of the night, Ryner Lute rushed out of the inn he was staying at, and headed over to the Eris house with a somehow urgent expression.

He'd gotten a hold of his movements up until then.

During that time, he hadn't encountered Captain Milk.

In that case, the next possibility.

3 - She'd been abducted by someone.

However, for what purpose?

There were three possibilities.

First, as bait to lure out Ryner Lute.

Second, as bait to lure out Luke Stokart.

Third, as bait to lure out the highest-ranking member of the **Taboo Breaker** Pursuit Squad, Rahel Miller.

Now then, which one?

There was no need to think too much over the third one. Luke understood Miller-senpai's competence better than anyone else. Even if he ignored it, things would resolve on their own, one way or another.

The worst case was the first one.

It was the case where Captain Milk was kidnapped for the sake of luring Ryner Lute out.

There was the chance that such a case would advance to where Luke's eyes couldn't follow at all.

That was why...

Then, Luke looked behind him, at a simple, or more so, dirty one-house inn.

The inn where Ryner Lute was staying.

Waiting here as an ambush, he'd thought there was a chance that Captain Milk's abductors would appear, so he came here, but...

"... It's me they have business with..."

Saying that, Luke felt slightly relieved.

If it was Ryner Lute they were trying to contact, then Lear Rinkal, who'd received the task of constantly observing Ryner, would have to deal with the abductors on his own.

But.

"....."

Luke again stared at the several men before him.

Quickly gauging their power... It seemed they would be a somewhat heavy burden for Lear alone.

However competent he was, the other party wasn't an opponent that could easily be handled without any preliminary information.

All in all, they were strong.

Because of that, they didn't move arrogantly. There were no openings whatsoever.

To be frank, in a fair and square fight, Luke would be killed by them in an instant.

They were also aware of that.

That was why the men, while approaching him,

"Now, come with us, Luke Stokkart. Resistance is futile..."

They began, but only made it that far.

The men moving towards him stopped.

And they stared down at their feet, and then looked at him with surprised expressions.

"... R-Ridiculous. This is..."

Then, Luke smiled sweetly and spoke in a calm tone.

"Yes. It's a magic trap. Ah, I'd recommend not moving. If you lift a leg, not only will you lose it, you'll be blown away without a trace."

However, with a still incredulous expression, the men continued.

"T-That can't be. W-Why would you set these..."

But without listening to those words, Luke looked over his shoulder.

At a separate group.

Looking at the rooftop of the inn where Ryner Lute was staying, where three men aimed knives at his back, "Ah, those over there shouldn't move either! After all, each of you would be blown away with the inn roof."

"Wha..."

With startled expressions, they stopped their movements. They stared at Luke.

Luke nodded at that, and with a smiling face,

"Ah, I'm glad you listened. According to my investigation, there aren't any customers staying in the second floor of the inn today... Nevertheless, if the roof were to be destroyed, they wouldn't be able to carry on their business. If that were to happen, they wouldn't be able to cover the cost of the damages, wouldn't they? However..."

He said, and again looked at the still men on top of the magic traps on the ground, before speaking.

"Let's not waste our taxes on that. You and I... as fellow people servants of Roland, for the future of this country, hmm?"

Saying that, he laughed.

At that, the men now trembled in fear.

"... Y-You bastard... How much do you know..."

But Luke shook his head, and,

"Nothing. But I have my guesses. The one above a strong private army like you... who abducted Milk Callaud... and who wishes to make contact me would be..."

From what Luke knew alone, there were a few candidates.

From within the nobles, four people.

From the upper brass in the military, two people.

Then, within that...

Luke took in a small breath.

Then,

"... Miran Froaude?"

In that instant.

The men's faces paled.

Luke smiled at that.

"Correct, am I? I see. Marquis Froaude's son. As he does things in a flashy manner, his movements were obvious... Well, though I understand what it is that he wants to do..."

However, regarding Froaude's abduction of Captain Milk...

Luke slightly tilted his head.

And staring at the men,

"Then, His Excellency Lieutenant General Froaude is calling for me? Not Major Rahel Miller, but me? Even though Major Miller is presently the leader... he's requested for me?"

The men nodded.

"... We have been told to bring along Luke Stokkart."

"... I see."

With that, Luke's thoughts began to whirl around once more.

There was a reason for calling not Miller-senpai, but Luke Stokkart.

"... It seems that it would be best to discuss this, doesn't it?"

After letting out a quiet sigh, Luke spoke.

"Incidentally, the magic traps underneath your feet are fakes, so it's fine to move already. That you so obediently believed you were trapped from the beginning and informed me of various things was quite a good thing for me."

At those words.

The men moved their legs; however, the magic circles underneath their feet had no effects whatsoever, and upon understanding that they were indeed fakes, they glared at Luke with hateful looks.

In return, Luke gave them a mischievous smile, and,

"Ah, I'll keep the aforementioned matter a secret from Froaude, so don't worry,"

He said that.

Like that, Luke was captured by the men and entered a prison...

And then the span of one month went by.



Within the darkness, a light burned.

And inside the prison, a radiant light shone.

No, it was perhaps too nice to be called a prison.

There was a table, bed, and bookshelf, in which several interesting books were lined up.

The place felt a bit like a hotel.

Furthermore, there was also a simple kitchen-like area, where he could whenever he wished to eat, where he could eat whatever he wanted for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, without need for anything else... It was a most gracious situation.

However, the door to his room wouldn't open.

The door wasn't a normal one either.

First was the iron lattice.

Second was that it was an iron-plated door.

And on each of the seven was a lock... It couldn't be opened from inside.

No, there wasn't a handle from the inside part.

There was strictly no disturbances.

In the end, it was a prison...

Then.

The door to the prison opened, as one man entered.

That man spoke.

"... Seeing as how you didn't put out the light, I assume it's effective?"

A cold, indifferent voice.

Luke lifted his head at that.

Before him was a strange man.

Long, pretty, and jet-black hair. A tall and slender body. A long finger with an unusual ring.

And demon-like eyes.

Cold, dark blue eyes that seemed as if they were frozen.

"....."

Ah, this is amazing, Luke thought.

Eyes that held all of the despair in the world.

Eyes that hoped for nothing.

Looking at something far away from his figure, this was...

"... Then you are His Excellency Lieutenant General Miran Froaude?"

Luke said, to which Froaude nodded.

Then, with those sharp, cold eyes that seemed to be looking down at all of the entire world gazed at him, and, "My apologies for my tardiness, Sergeant Luke Stokkart. Despite moving a piece, I took a bit too much time."

Piece...

That was what Froaude said.

At that, Luke slightly inclined his head.

"Piece, hmm... that would be regarding Ryner Lute?"

At those words, after making a somewhat surprised face, Froaude smiled.

"... This is, this is... as one would expect. I'm glad to be able to discuss this with someone with a sharp mind. In that case, the reason I called you here...?"

The reason.

The reason he called not for Rahel Miller, but for Luke Stokkart.

No, even without thinking over it, it was simple.

Luke stared at Froaude, and,

"Then I... am to kill Ryner Lute?"

Again, Froaude smiled cheerfully.

"... You truly are wonderful."

Affirmative.

In other words, that was why Froaude called for Luke.

However, Luke's expression trembled at that.

And he recalled the contents of the order that he had received from Sion.

First.

Search and collect any Heroes' Relics that the Alpha Stigma bearer, Ryner Lute, overlooks.

Two.

Observe the Alpha Stigma bearer, Ryner Lute.

Three.

Should the Alpha Stigma bearer, Ryner Lute, go berserk outside of Roland or show any traitorous behaviour—

Erase him...

That was why Luke had constantly observed Ryner Lute.

But at the same time, he also understood the form of the order.

Countermeasures for if Ryner Lute's existence was leaked out to others.

Countermeasures for if the fact they were keeping what was considered an **Alpha Stigma** monster, despised as taboo, was leaked out.

And countermeasures for the case where Ryner Lute betrayed the Roland Empire...

But anyhow, he understood that Sion didn't honestly believe that he would have to kill Ryner.

At least, not right now.

However, Froaude was saying to kill Ryner Lute.

And Luke also understood the reason why.

That was why,

"... I don't quite think that's in good taste,"

Luke said with a trembling expression.

But at that, Froaude easily—

"Regardless of taste, this country won't move."

"Certainly, that's true, but... the mindset that to save as many as possible, it can't be helped that there are sacrifices, more or less, is rather..."

However, at that, Froaude again easily said,

"Only Ryner Lute's life alone can I see no worth in being pained over. From the beginning, there was no worth in keeping him alive."

Luke frowned further at that.

"... That way of speaking is a bit..."

But then Froaude interrupted him, and,

"A bit... what? Or, Sergeant Stokkart, do you believe that Ryner Lute should be allowed to live?"

At those words.

"....."

Luke fell silent.

"There is no worth in keeping Ryner Lute alive."

Froaude had said something along those lines.

And the reason was,

*"As a dangerous **Alpha Stigma** bearer despised by everyone as taboo, there is no worth in keeping Ryner Lute alive."*

In his words, there was none of the usual, simple discrimination.

No, to say nothing of the fact that Froaude had evaluated Ryner Lute's worth more so than anyone else.

That was why he understood that much.

That was why he'd specifically gone through all this trouble to call Luke here.

That was Ryner Lute's only worth.

That was... the only worth in his life.

Staring at Froaude,

"... And the benefit that will be gained if Ryner Lute dies... what does His Excellency Lieutenant General Froaude think it is?"

Luke said that.

Froaude gazed at Luke with cold eyes that were like death, and,

"Have you not thought about it?"

"....."

Luke didn't answer that.

But Froaude went on.

"No, not only you. Major Rahel Miller as well—you and he have thought about the same things as me... or are our thoughts different from one another?"

"....."

Luke didn't respond to that either.

Silent like that, his thoughts started to go down a different path.

The situation right now wasn't good at all.

More than was expected, the inside of Miran Froaude's heart was being exposed.

Though he'd thought that he'd only be able to probe into the stomach...

Coming here to contact him upfront, this situation was...

"... I see. Roland's situation is to that extent..."

Froaude nodded at that.

"...If nothing is done about this..."

His words stopped there.

But Luke understood what the rest was.

They'd be destroyed.

They'd be invaded by other countries.

That was why Froaude had contacted Luke in such an earnest manner.

"....."

In an earnest manner.

Ernest... is it?

Luke spoke.

"I respectfully decline."

But Froaude gazed at Luke with dark blue eyes, and,

"You should know very well that you can't decline."

"Why?"

"We've taken a hostage. Milk Callaud's life is the prerequisite to ensure that you will listen to our demands..."

He began, but Luke interrupted him, shaking his head.

"That's not it, Your Excellency Lieutenant General Froaude. After killing Ryner Lute, you intend to kill Milk Callaud as well."

At that,

"....."

This time, it was Froaude who didn't reply.

Instead, he only stared at Luke with cold eyes.

But Luke continued.

"In our present case, that would be quite effective. Isn't that correct? In order to crush Sion-san's heart all at once, so that his naivety will disappear... Along with Ryner Lute, it would benefit you to kill Milk Callaud as well. Am I wrong?"

"....."

Froaude still didn't respond.

However, Luke stared straight into Froaude's eyes, and,

"And so, first of all, the guarantee of Milk Callaud's life... if I cannot receive a vow of that, I have no reason to listen to any of your demands. Any discussion can continue after that."

"....."

At those words, Froaude made a slightly troubled face. After dimly furrowing his brow,

"... Hmm. I see. I understand what it is you're saying. Very well. I promise that I shall not kill Milk Callaud."

Luke smiled wryly at that, and,

"Isn't that a lie?"

Froaude easily nodded.

"Correct. It's a lie. Perhaps I'll kill her, perhaps I won't... but regardless, you won't believe what I say. After all, either way, Milk Callaud is a hostage within my hands."

Then, furrowing his brow further as if deep in thought,

"... However, that you aren't a fool who wouldn't understand such a thing is something I understand from this conversation up to this point... And so, by what means shall you ensure Milk Callaud's safety from me?"

At that, Luke easily—

"In exchange for your life... by something such as that?"

Like that, he looked around the room.

Right now, Luke was standing by the bed, away from where the room's entrance was placed.

And Froaude was at that entrance.

The distance between where they were standing was about six long, adult-sized paces.

And that was...

The distance was such that if it were Luke, he could lunge across and kill Froaude in one go.

Then.

Froaude made a further troubled face, and,

"... In other words, if Milk Callaud's safety cannot be guaranteed, you shall kill me?"

Luke nodded.

"Well, something like that."

But in response, a thin smile arose in Froaude's face.

A cold smile.

Within Froaude's expression, there was an even deeper coldness than before.

He gently moved his left hand towards his right hand and began to stroke his strange, black ring.

And he spoke.

"... Sergeant Luke Stokkart. I understand your strength well. You were a central figure in the previous revolution... as well as someone with great power who rivals Crimson Fingered Claugh Klom."

Luke shook his head at that, and responded in a joking manner.

"No, no, if I were to fight with Claugh, I'd be killed in an instant."

And that was the truth.

Magic skill.

Hand-to-hand combat skill.

Reflexes, body strength, speed...

Claugh surpassed Luke in all of them.

The one time he'd fought with Claugh...

"....."

It was a rather depressing memory, and so Luke stopped.

At any rate, Luke didn't feel as if he could win if he fought against Claugh.

He was a combat genius.

In comparison, Luke's level was that of somewhat above the average person.

But.

Froaude gazed at Luke and spoke.

"However, you possess a different talent. Your ability to grasp the situation stands above all else... No, those words don't quite convey it. Even just from the data I gathered, you've been undefeated in twenty battles. Furthermore, all in disadvantageous situations that should have spelled certain defeat.

This is abnormal. Creating miracles, strategy—one could say that you are a genius at tactics..."

"... You flatter me. However, you've done impressive research. Even though in most of those battles, I never gave my real name... but if you understand that much, then for a short while, complying with..."

He began, but Froaude shook his head.

And during that period, he continued to stroke his ring.

His black ring.

While stroking that black ring,

"You may be a genius, but... you cannot kill me. After all, a human like you... is not my enemy."

As he said such a thing, Luke tilted his head.

"Hoh? Your choice of words makes it sound like you aren't human at all... Oh, could it be that you aren't human?"

But in response, Froaude—

"No, no, I'm human. But a human such as yourself is unable to kill me."

"... Saying such a troublesome thing again... You're human but can't be killed by a human..."

Luke began, but stopped, and then,

"... Well, that's enough with the pointless chatter. First of all, if I can't provide proof that I can kill you, then this discussion can't move forward."

"As I said, you are not capable of such."

"We'll see. Well, at any rate, in order to test that..."

It was when Luke said that.

Froaude laughed.

He held up his right hand high in the air.

His right hand with that black ring.

And,

"... Let there—"

It was the instant he spoke.

Froaude's entire body emitted unbelievably strong pressure.

Killing intent.

Demonic intent.

There were various ways of describing it... At any rate, the signs of something dangerous filled their surroundings.

Furthermore, it wasn't just one thing.

One, two, three, four...

Steadily, steadily they increased.

"... This is—"

At that, Luke's eyes raced around the room.

But the signs had no figure. Even so, the room was brimming with them...

Then, Froaude spoke.

"... be darkness."

In that instant.

The shadows at Froaude's feet began to take form.

Black shadows leapt through the air and took the form of beasts.

"....."

Luke stared at that.

However, he didn't move.

He immediately understood the situation.

Black shadow beasts.

It seemed that somehow, that was Froaude's ability.

Perhaps it was the power of that ring.

With that ring, he could freely manipulate the beasts, or perhaps freely manipulate the shadows' form...

"... E-Either way, this isn't the time for that."

Saying that, Luke took a step back.

However, regarding that,

"It's already too late,"

Froaude said, moving his finger slightly.

Luke didn't know what order he was giving to those beasts of darkness with that movement, but the beasts responded and moved to attack him...

It was all over.

Immediately, something, glittering with light, seemed to fall from the ceiling...

Gyuushuu—!

With an undecipherable sound, the black shadow beasts were torn to fine pieces and destroyed.

"... Wha—"

A voice spilled from where Froaude was.

But like that, Luke began to run.

He ran straight towards Froaude.

Froaude scowled at that, and,

"Damn it... let there..."

He said, holding up his hand...

As a small sound rang out, light wrapped itself around his hand.

And Luke—

"Move your finger any further and both it and your hand will go flying."

At those words, Froaude looked at his arm and scowled even more.

"... Threads...? But this is..."

He began, but his words ended there.

Luke grabbed Froaude's collar, and like that, slammed him against the iron lattice.

"Gah..."

As Froaude moaned, Luke stopped.

After withdrawing a concealed knife and holding it to Froaude's neck, he spoke in a low, dark tone that was entirely unlike him.

"... Just try to lay one finger of that filthy hand on Milk Callaud... I'll kill you on the spot."

At those words.

Froaude, pushed up against the lattice, could only look at Luke.

"... Hmm. So when it comes to Milk Callaud, even you, as usually composed as you are, would kill me even without gain or loss. Is this act for the sake of conveying that to me?"

Luke smiled sweetly at that.

A calm expression.

With that calm expression, he firmly began to dig the knife in. Blood began to spill from Froaude's throat, and yet he didn't stop.

If Froaude didn't move his body away, his artery would likely be cut, and yet Luke still pressed the knife in further...

However, with a smiling face, Luke spoke.

"... It's not an act. We show no forgiveness to those who meddle in our family. Unless you wish to be killed, you shouldn't carelessly lay a hand on us. If you understand, blink once and only once. If you have any complaints about that, then we can resume this battle. In that case, I'll kill you."

At that.

"....."

Froaude blinked only once.

After confirming that, Luke moved the knife away from Froaude's neck, and,

"... My deepest apologies. Did that hurt?"

His voice again returning to its usual tone, he said that.

Though Froaude's artery wasn't cut, he touched his bleeding neck with his finger and then looked at that blood.

"... I see. If this is the amount of power that you possess... then certainly, that concludes this deal. You would kill me... However, you wouldn't kill me as long as I do not lay a hand on Milk Callaud... is that how it is?"

Luke nodded.

"That is."

At that, Froade narrowed his eyes and looked around.

"... Then, the tool you were using before was... threads?"

"That is correct."



"... Is it a type of one of those Heroes' Relics that Ryner Lute wrote about in his report?"

Luke nodded again.

"As he forgot to retrieve it, I've been given the chance to use it."

"That relic's ability is?"

At that, Luke discarded the knife, and then went back into his pocket, withdrawing a thin, small needle.

A thin needle that one couldn't see unless they concentrated their eyes on it.

After holding it up so that Froaude could see, he explained.

"Its ability... There isn't much to speak of. Anyhow, in spite of its thinness, it cannot be broken. The threads from this needle extend indefinitely... they are also durable to the point that they cannot be cut. However, that is its only ability."

Luke's guess was that previously, this needle and its threads likely weren't meant to be used as a weapon. A convenient sewing tool... That was likely its level.

But.

Froaude repeated Luke's words.

"However, that is its only ability... Depending on its user, it can become this powerful..."

He looked up at the ceiling, and then turned his gaze to the room's light, and,

"... The reason you didn't put out the room's light was to hide the threads you placed on the ceiling."

Continuing, he looked down at Luke's feet.

"... Furthermore, you pretended to be surprised by my Shadow Beasts, taking a step back during the fight so that you could prepare to invoke your trap. By kicking the needle you'd stabbed by your feet, you invoked the trap of the threads at the ceiling... Is that the truth of this fight?"

To that, Luke stared at Froaude with a fed up expression.

"... I don't feel like it'll be my victory next time."

But Froaude's expression didn't change at those words at all.

With a dark, cold expression, he said one more time:

"... In the right hands, Heroes' Relics can become such a powerful weapon..."

Thus, there isn't any time."

"... Because of Gastark, you mean?"

"....."

Froaude didn't answer. No, he had an expression that said *You should already know.*

Certainly, there was no need to specifically answer.

The situation was already quite bad.

According to their intelligence, it seemed that Gastark was using a great number of **Heroes' Relics** and invading other countries, one by one.

But there was the central continent in between them and the north... It was a discussion about the far off north...

For the Roland Empire that was seated all the way on the southern edge of the continent, there didn't seem to be any real connection...

But there was a significant connection.

One country was moving.

The entire world was starting to move.

They were headed towards war.

No, even if it were Roland, they were already dealing with the flames of war.

After subjugating the Kingdom of Estabul whom they'd warred with for many years, the Roland that'd become a superpower in the southern continent would next be thinking about unifying the southern continent.

Even though temporarily, this country's king, Sion Astal, didn't wish for that...

The neighbouring countries of Runa and Nelpha wouldn't believe that.

Afraid of when Roland would become an enemy... They'd begun to prepare for that.

Before Roland could become an enemy, they had to ally with other countries to oppose it.

Before Roland could become an enemy, they had to invade and destroy it.

Before Roland could become an enemy.

Before Roland could become an enemy...

Once the cogwheels were moving, they wouldn't stop.

So that they wouldn't be engulfed, they had to continue moving and ride on those cogwheels.

And for the sake of riding on those cogwheels...

Luke recalled what Froaude had said when he entered the room.

"Despite moving a piece, I took a bit too much time."

The meaning of those words.

"... Then, was the piece [Ryner Lute]^[1] leaving Roland part of your plot?"

After laughing cheerfully at that, Froaude—

"No... That event went beyond my plot. It seems that he went along with a new **Alpha Stigma** bearer and betrayed Roland."

"....."

That was the reason why Froaude had been late in contacting Luke.

But that matter was inconsequential.

That Ryner Lute had gone with someone and betrayed Roland... In that case, the order that Luke had received from Sion to erase him was invoked.

Froaude went on.

"His Majesty will likely return in a week. Please depart this country before then. By that point, it will be too late to withdraw those orders."

Luke nodded at that.

Correct.

If he were to kill Ryner Lute, he had to depart this country before Sion returned.

With that, suddenly, Luke recalled a passage in the report that Ryner Lute had written and that Sion had shown him.

People hate dying.

They hate killing, too.

They don't like making others cry, or crying themselves. What would it be like, not being able to choose your own life?

What if your family died?

How about the person you love?

No one ever wants that, and yet the world hands out that sorrow for no reason, laughing all the way.

I've never had any burning desire to change something. But it would be sad without change, and I don't want to lose anything else, so...

It sucks, but...

I think it's about time we move forward. I've averted my eyes until now, but if I have to, I'll take a hard look at my own past.'

And,

To achieve a world where nobody ever loses anything.

One that doesn't make that child or Kiefer cry, one where Tahile, Tony, and Fahle don't die, one where Sion doesn't have to brood.

A world where everyone can smile and just take afternoon naps all the time.

- Ryner Lute

He thought that that seemed wonderful.

It truly seemed wonderful.

A world where nobody ever lost anything.

A world where everyone could smile.

If it was to create that sort of world, he would lend all of his strength.

If everyone could smile with that.

If he could protect Milk Callaud's smiling face with that...

If it was to create that sort of world, he would give up his life.

But.

In reality, such a thing didn't exist.

In this world, such a thing didn't exist.

An illusion.

An illusion everyone dreamed of once.

No, if one's ability was high, then it was high.

If power existed, then there was a deep hole to fall into.

By chasing that illusion, nobody could save anything.

And so, he had to be killed.

Ryner Lute's existence...

"... He... could destroy Sion-san's heart..."

Froaude smiled in satisfaction at that.

"It's truly reassuring to think that someone like you is here in Roland."

But Luke didn't answer.

Instead, with only a somewhat sad expression,

"... I understand. I shall kill Ryner Lute,"

He said quietly.

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ "Piece" here is written the same as before, but with "Ryner Lute" as its furigana—aka Luke's referring specifically to Ryner here and calling him the piece that Froaude spoke of.

Chapter 2: A worthless god, a bored goddess

It was entirely as if he were within a dream.

It was something that happened in the recent past.

Sion smiled with a malicious face, and forced him to go on an adventure with Ferris.

Remembering the things that happened during that time, Ryner Lute, without thinking—

"... Seriously, why am I thinking about that..."

He muttered.

A listless tall and lean figure with a bent back. Black bedhead hair.

And, the same colour as his black hair, sleepy black eyes with, in their center...

A thin, vermillion five-star pentacle floated.

With one of those eyes closed, Ryner firmly pushed at it with his finger.

He pushed at it with enough strength to crush an ordinary eyeball...

However, this eye didn't yield.

No, even when Ryner had once tried to gouge his eyes out with a knife, he couldn't injure it at all.

With this amount of pressure, he wasn't able to crush his eyes.

These special eyes called the **Alpha Stigma**... It couldn't be removed from him so easily.

Cursed eyes despised by everyone as taboo.

Once they lost control, they would go on a rampage.

That was why, he thought, it was inevitable that people called them monsters who possessed the eyes of demons.

After all, Ryner himself cursed his own eyes.

"....."

Without these eyes.

Without these, I...

"... Idiot,"

Muttering that, Ryner shook his head.

Right.

He truly was an idiot.

Even though he'd resigned himself to it a long time ago.

That he was a cursed monster.

A demon who brought mystery to those around him just by existing...

He'd known that for a long time now.

Despite that...

He still liked people.

Even though he knew it was foolish, he still liked people.

Sion smiled.

Ferris was by his side.

Like that, living completely like a normal human...

"....."

That kind of dream-like place was still...

He hurt people.

Ryner recalled Sion's expression at the end.

A terribly suffering expression.

Sion had given orders to erase Ryner. However, that was the natural thing to

do. Ryner was a monster that killed people. If he went berserk, he could do nothing but kill others.

As king, it was a logical order to give.

But what had Sion been thinking when he gave out that order?

He couldn't figure that out.

And Ferris.

She...

"....."

There.

Ryner stopped thinking at that point.

Even if he thought about it, nothing could be done.

After all, they would never meet again.

Nevertheless, Ryner remembered the few words she gave him.

Her words.

"You're not a monster."

Even though he'd gone berserk before her and tried to kill her...

She said that.

"You're not a monster."

She told him that.

It was nice.

Looking at that figure and yet still saying that, it truly was nice.

And she spoke of his desire.

Her words.

"You are my partner, my manservant, and my tea-drinking companion. You're no monster. Can you hear me? Ryner."

At that time, he'd honestly wished for those words to be so.

But they weren't.

In reality, they weren't.

He was a monster.

Never knowing when he might kill Sion and Ferris.

Hurting the only two people by his side.

Hurting the only important people by his side.

Like that, he couldn't stay near them.

Now, he couldn't be with them.

That was why...

Then.

"Say, Ryner. Are you not hungry?"

A voice rang out.

"Hmm?"

At that, Ryner looked to his side.

A man walked alongside him down the road.

Tiir Rumibul.

Dressed entirely like a clergyman, wearing a tight, tidy jet black suit down to his black shoes, his entire body was unified in a single shade of black.

Furthermore, he had the same black hair and eyes as Ryner...

And again, like Ryner, a thin, vermillion pattern floated in the center of his eyes.

But the shape was different.

Rather than a five-star pentacle, his was a cross...

According to Tiir, it was different from what Ryner possessed, the **Alpha Stigma**, and was called **Iino Doue**.

Though Ryner had yet to receive an explanation of its abilities, judging by

what he'd seen, it was entirely different.

The abilities of Ryner's **Alpha Stigma**, beyond going berserk, was that with only one look, he could understand the structure of any magic, no matter how complicated, and duplicate it.

But Tiir's eyes... the ability of the **lino Doue** was different.

His eyes devoured magic and people.

No, strictly-speaking, they devoured what was within people and the power used to create magic—magic scholars called it seirei, or the flow of energy in the air...

At any rate, he devoured people and magic—seirei—and by doing so, his body's physical capabilities became abnormal.

His movements were to the extent that even Ferris, who boasted overwhelming physical capabilities, and Ryner using magic to enhance his own couldn't match them.

No, to say nothing of the fact that he alone could wipe out an army.

Devouring people for power, and killing people with that power.

Compared to that monster, the **Alpha Stigma** was nothing.

That monster,

"After walking all this way without eating anything, hunger will settle in sooner or later, don't you think?"

Said such things in a smiling, light-hearted manner...

Instinctively, Ryner—

"D-Don't tell me you mean to devour humans again!?"

At those words.

Tiir's eyes widened slightly.

Those eyes with the vermillion cross.

Those eyes looked at Ryner, and,

"... Of course not. Rather, Ryner, you don't devour humans, correct?"

"O-Obviously. Humans aren't meant to be eaten!"

Tiir laughed cheerfully.

"Oh, you said something good, Ryner. Correct. After all, humans are inferior existences that aren't even worth devouring, aren't they?"

"... No, that's not what I meant."

Tiir tilted his head at that.

"Hmm? Then, what did you mean? Why shouldn't one devour humans?"

"T-That's..."

Ryner said, but then stopped.

Why shouldn't one devour humans...?

It was simple.

It was something so obvious that young children could understand.

One was human... so one didn't devour other humans like them.

Even though it truly should've been simple...

Tiir continued.

"Hmm. We should first correct this misunderstanding, shouldn't we? As you, Ryner, were raised among humans and brainwashed by them, you've had false knowledge planted in your head... We aren't inferior existences like those humans. We who possess God's Eyes are superior."

Ryner frowned at those words.

"You're saying we're not human?"

Tiir looked at Ryner's expression, and then smiled sadly.

"Yes... Most **Alpha Stigma** bearers make that sort of face when I tell them, 'You aren't human.' Your misfortune starts..."

"Huh? Our misfortune?"

Ryner asked, to which Tiir nodded.

"... Your misfortune starts at birth. Born as a human child, you're raised as a

human child for years. During that period, you're brainwashed. As a human, you become happy, and so are brainwashed. And you love humans, believe in them, and more... and in the end... you're betrayed. Scorned as a monster, feared as a demon... and then killed. Am I wrong?"

"....."

He wasn't.

That was certainly correct.

Most humans scorned the **Alpha Stigma** as taboo, feared them, and wanted them dead.

In Ryner's case, he didn't possess any memories of the time between his birth and several years, so his might be a bit different... but Arua...

A boy who was the same as Ryner as an **Alpha Stigma** bearer had already gone through that life.

When the **Alpha Stigma** appeared in his eyes, his parents were killed, and he was treated cruelly as the military's research sample.

No, Ryner as well had been treated as the military's research sample.

But...

"... But aren't you the same too?"

Ryner said.

"You too, before that cross pattern arose in your eyes..."

He began, but Tiir interrupted, shaking his head.

"You're wrong. I never once liked humans. Rather, I've never thought of myself as one. No, from the beginning, your eyes..."

Saying that, he pointed at the vermillion five-star pentacle that floated in the center of Ryner's eyes.

Then, pointing at the vermillion cross in his own eyes,

"And my **lino Doue**... the timing of its opening is different. The **Alpha Stigma** generally arises approximately five or six years after birth. Your **Alpha Stigma**

appeared around then, correct?"

Ryner had no memories of that.

When the vermillion five-star pentacle arose in his eyes...

Though he remembered the first time he used the power of his eyes... it seemed that the five-star pentacle had arisen in his eyes before that...

In the beginning, he didn't use the power of his eyes, and without peering into his eyes, they hadn't been seen by other people.

That was why he might've had those eyes from before then, or he might not have, but...

What Tiir said about the **Alpha Stigma** arising around the age of five or six seemed to be right.

Arua seemed to be around that age.

"....."

Anyhow, this was new information.

Ryner looked at Tiir.

And, as expected, it was worth it to go with him, he thought.

He wasn't pleased with the man's mindset of calmly killing and devouring humans...

Nevertheless, this guy had plenty of information that he didn't know about.

There was merit in going along with him.

Ryner continued to talk.

"Then, the **Iino Doue**... its opening? Its timing is different from ours?"

"Yes. The **Iino Doue**'s opening occurs while still within a human woman's womb."

"Whoa? Really?"

"Yes."

Tiir easily nodded.

But then Ryner had a problem with that.

Tiir knew that the opening of his **lino Doue** occurred while within his mother's womb.

But that,

"Then, you've got a human mother? Despite being raised by that mother, you don't think of yourself as human?"

He began, but then Tiir smiled.

"I don't. Rather, I don't even know the face of the human woman that was pregnant with me."

"Eh? Then... you don't have any memories of your childhood either?"

Staring at Ryner with a curious expression,

"Hmm? Judging by your words just now, you don't have any memories of your childhood, Ryner?"

Tiir asked that in return.

At that, Ryner remembered.

His very first memory.

It was red.

As far as he could see, spanning across the entire ground, a red memory.

Suddenly, his eyes awakened...

Upon opening his eyes, there was a wasteland.

The evening sky was dyed a bright red.

And the ground as well... covered in corpses, it was dyed bright red by a sea of blood.

Surrounding him was nothing but a mountain of corpses, corpses, corpses, corpses.

That was his very first memory.

And the only thing he remembered was his name.

He knew nothing else.

Why was he in that place?

What was he doing there?

He couldn't remember at all.

That was why Ryner nodded, looking at Tiir.

"Yeah. When I was five... I don't have any memories from before around that time. I only remember my name. Is it like that for all **Alpha Stigma** bearers?"

At the question,

"... Hmm. I wonder,"

Tiir crossed his arms, as he began to seriously ponder this.

After contemplating like that for a while,

"... No, the **Alpha Stigma** bearers I've found weren't like that. For most of them, when the fact they possess an **Alpha Stigma** is revealed to society, they're persecuted together with their parents or otherwise killed by them... That's how it often is..."

Like Arua.

Unsurprisingly, it was just about like that.

Then, what was he...

His thoughts began, but then Tiir gazed at Ryner with sorrowful eyes.

"... Perhaps you were dealt with a heavy burden to your emotional state. Something that, without thinking, you sealed away your memories for, Ryner. After all, humans truly are despicable, aren't they? Saying that they love you while discriminating against you, laughing while they easily kill their own family. That's why I believe them to be such inferior existences. They're the insane monsters..."

At those words.

"... Can't deny that."

At Ryner's expression when that was said, Tiir smiled again.

"So you don't need to make such a painful expression, Ryner. You aren't human. You have no connection to the things that humans do. After all, you're different from them."

With Tiir saying that... Ryner's feelings became increasingly complicated.

As Tiir wore an affable, smiling expression, it seemed that his praise came from his true feelings.

"... Saying I'm not human, even if you praise me..."

Muttering under his breath, Ryner again frowned.

He wasn't human.

He'd never considered that possibility.

But could it be true?

Certainly, he possessed the eyes of a monster.

Thinking about that, Ryner looked at the palms of his hands.

Those hands looked like the same as a human's.

Skin. Nails. Thin, transparent veins.

They looked just like a human's.

No, it wasn't only his hands.

Eyes aside, there's nothing different from a human... he thought.

That was what he thought.

Always, always thinking that was how he lived.

He was a monster.

But if he didn't have these eyes.

Without these eyes...

"....."

That...

Again, those same thoughts went around in his head.

Again and again, the same things went around and around.

And... those words echoed in his head.

The words that Ferris's brother, Lucile, had given.

"What manner of unfulfillable dreams... has such a hideous monster seen?"

He was a monster...

He knew that.

"You should know this already. The bloodstained hands of a monster like you... can't grasp anything... No matter where you reach, they'll never be able to attain anything."

He knew all that.

But, nevertheless.

Nevertheless, if it was possible...

But then, as if seeing straight through Ryner's thoughts, Tiir spoke.

"Incidentally, to continue the previous topic of how I don't know the face of the human woman who was pregnant with me..."

At that,

"... Eh?"

For a moment, Ryner couldn't respond.

But Tiir paid that no heed and continued.

*"It was in the final month of her pregnancy that, within that woman's womb, my eyes opened. My **lino Doue** awakened. And what do you think happened after that?"*

At that question.

Ryner—

He stared at Tiir.

And,

"... N-No way."

Without thinking, Ryner trembled.

He could infer and make a conclusion based off what Tiir had said just now.

But that...

That can't...

In his mother's womb, Tiir had been a human child.

Despite that, he didn't know his mother's face.

Why was that?

Why...

"... There's no way you... devoured your mother from the inside?"

At that, Tiir's expression became unabashedly sullen.

"... Could you not call that my 'mother?'"

"You..."

But already, Ryner couldn't continue his words.

After all, this topic...

It definitely wasn't a topic he was expecting.

This kind of fool.

It was impossible.

After all, in that case...

In that case...

While staring at Ryner, Tiir spoke cheerfully.

"Correct. It seems that you've finally realized it, Ryner. A child within the womb... a fetus generally doesn't possess awareness, their own will, or things like that. Despite that, from within that woman's womb, I devoured her. Something like that..."

Ryner trembled further.

Something like that.

In other words.

Tiir...

Iino Doue bearers were such an existence from the beginning.

Without being taught anything from anyone, they were like birds who knew how to fly from the start.

Iino Doue bearers were existences who, in the beginning, were born by devouring and killing their mothers.

Not human, but a different...

"N-No way!"

Ryner reflexively said.

But in response, Tiir continued to speak in a gentle and calm tone.

"Are those... words of contempt? If you're born through devouring and tearing apart your mother's womb, you're a monster... is that what you wish to say about me?"

"... Ah, uu—"

Again, Ryner didn't say anything.

But to the very end, Tiir spoke in a gentle tone, as if completely worried about Ryner.

"... You shouldn't speak too ill of me. After all, those words could come back to you. But it's all right. Don't be afraid. You're not alone. You're not human. Rather, you're one of us."

And gently, he moved to hold Ryner's shoulder...

"D-Don't touch me."

Ryner shoved Tiir's arm away.

But regarding that, Tiir unsurprisingly spoke in a sympathetic voice.

"This is... the **Alpha Stigma** bearers'... your misfortune. Because of the order... while within the fetus, because of the order that came to me..."

He spoke of such things.

Ryner made a puzzled face.

"... Order? What are you talking about?"

In response, Tiir pointed up at the sky.

And he said this.

"... An order from God, of course. The moment my eyes awakened, a voice that only I could hear descended from the heavens. *Have your first feeding. Devour this inferior human*, it said."

"... Eh?"

At those words.

Ryner stopped trembling.

Looking at Tiir, he asked,

"... Descended from the heavens?"

Tiir's expression became slightly surprised, and,

"Hmm? This is the first time an **Alpha Stigma** bearer reacted to the 'descending' part."

"Listen, just answer me. A voice descended from the heavens?"

Tiir nodded.

"Correct. No, in reality, perhaps it's more accurate to say that it resounds directly in your mind... but yes. It feels like it descends upon you. Other **Iino Doue** bearers say the same. Afterwards, **Will Heim** bearers seem to hear a voice approximately two months after birth... They also say that a voice descends upon them."

"**Will Heim**...? Speaking of which, you said before that there are other Cursed Eye bearers besides us?"

Immediately, Tiir—

"Like I said, isn't 'Cursed Eyes' a discriminatory term that humans use to scorn us? It's 'God's Eyes.' "

He made such a correction, saying it frankly, but it wasn't important.

Ryner went on.

"Then, within these Cursed Eyes... no, I mean... God's Eyes are my **Alpha Stigma** and your **lino Doue**... and the **Will Heim** that was brought up just now..."

He began, but Tiir also shook his head at that.

"No. There are two others. There's the **Torch Curse** and the **Ebra Crypt**."

"Those too, huh..."

As Ryner groaned, exasperated at what he'd seen up until now.

It seemed that were five Cursed Eyes... or otherwise called God's Eyes.

But up until now, Ryner had never encountered any Cursed Eyes beyond the **Alpha Stigma**.

While he was travelling around various countries, no matter where he investigated, there had never been any reports of any Cursed Eyes except for the **Alpha Stigma**.

In other words...

"Within the Cursed... or, I mean, God's Eyes, there are predominantly **Alpha Stigma** bearers..."

Ryner began, before stopping himself.

That wasn't it.

Right now, it wasn't necessary to ask about that. There were more important matters to be discussed. There were things he had to ask about right now.

That was,

"No, let me change my question a bit. Um, so, let's go back to the earlier topic."

"Earlier topic? Which one? Ah, do you mean about getting hungry..."

"No, no, no, that's not it."

But Tiir placed a hand on his stomach, and,

"... But aren't you hungry yet? After talking like this, I've gotten considerably hungry."

Now that he mentioned it, he did feel it...

Ryner then looked around.

Right now, he was on the road from Roland to Nelpha.

If they went a little farther down the road, they would reach the national border and enter Nelpha.

And sporadically inserted on that road were several tea houses...

At that, Ryner grimaced.

Because one of the tea houses lined up in a row on the street was one that Ryner had visited before.

That was the first time he'd met Ferris.

On Sion's orders, it was in the middle of their journey to Imperial Nelpha to search for Heroes' Relics.

Ferris had dropped by the tea house, and,

"Eat this,"

She said with an emotionless face, handing him dango.

At that,

Why doesn't this person have any manners?

Ryner had thought such a thing.

Still, the offered dango had been surprisingly delicious...

Despite that, he realized it was the first time Ferris had eaten the dango there.

Back then, she hadn't known whether she liked the dango or not...

In her emotionless face that was an expression in itself, it wasn't known.

"....."

Ryner looked at the tea house before him.

But despite the fact that there was a tea house... Ferris wasn't there.

He felt that that was incredibly strange.

"See, before we enter Nelpha, let's eat some dango,"

Tiir said cheerfully... but Ryner shook his head.

"... No, no. I'm not hungry yet."



"Hmm? Ryner, do you not like dango?"

"Eh?"

At that, Ryner thought for a bit.

Dango.

Dango was...

"... Yeah. I hate dango."

"Ah, is that so? Then, for this occasion, I must decide that humans..."

"I'm not eating that!"

Ryner shouted, to which Tiir placed both hands on his hips in an utterly preaching tone.

"Being that picky is bad for your health, you know."

"... No, there has to be an alternative to dango or humans..."

After saying that, *that joke was not funny*, he thought.

In response, Tiir now looked concerned, and,

"Is it truly all right not to eat? If we don't eat here, then until we enter Nelpha, there won't be another shop?"

He said that somewhat persistently.

"For crying out loud, what are you, my mom... if I say I'm not hungry, I'm not hungry. Leaving that aside, is it okay for you not to be eating dango?"

Ryner said with a weary expression.

However, regarding that, Tiir stared past the tea house and further down the street.

"No, I'll wait for the meal waiting at our destination..."

"Hey, you're not talking about the border guards, are you? I said before not to devour humans."

"I know. I told you from the beginning that I prefer not to devour such inferior, disgusting things like humans. I prefer magic. At any rate, those border

guards had already been attacked by the time we crossed the border?"

As Tiir said such things, Ryner gazed at him with suspicious eyes.

"... You're not lying, are you?"

Tiir stared back at Ryner, straight in the eye, and,

"No, I'm not lying. The ones who lie so easily are humans, wouldn't you say? I refuse to lie to a friend."

He said that with a serious expression.

Just by looking into his eyes, Ryner knew that he wasn't lying.

It wasn't so much that he thought he was an honest person... but because he hated humans from the bottom of his heart.

Humans lied, and they didn't.

After all, they were different from those inferior humans.

After all, they were... a superior species.

It felt like he was slightly obsessed with those kinds of words.

That was why he wouldn't lie to Ryner.

After all, they were a superior species.

But.

"....."

Was that true?

Ryner stared at Tiir.

Tiir's eyes.

The vermillion cross that floated in their centers.

Staring at that cross, he contemplated.

This was—

This alone was proof that they surpassed humans and were a superior species?

This alone?

Certainly, they possessed abilities unlike humans'... However, those abilities weren't anything he hadn't seen something similar to in the past.

For example, weaving a magic circle tattoo.

Burying that into one's body and offering a price, one could possess unique powers.

The previous Roland practiced those studies... human experimentation with zeal. It was likely that an unbelievable amount of people died for that.

Through several sacrifices... there were numerous people possessing unusual powers in the previous Roland.

In the orphanage Ryner had previously belonged to and in the Hidden Elites, he'd met people with those abilities.

But those guys were human.

No, that was obvious.

Even if they were humans who'd been remodelled, they were still human regardless.

They were just humans who'd had a magic circle buried in them...

Then, what about us?

Are we different?

Just because we have a strange pattern in our eyes instead, we're not human?

"....."

Ryner looked at Tiir's eyes again.

At those eyes with a thin, vermillion cross floating in them.

That was the only peculiarity there.

As for what made him different from other humans, that was the only thing.

For that alone, the Cursed Eye bearers were scorned as taboo, abused as demons, and feared as monsters.

Certainly, they might be monsters.

They might be monsters who killed people.

But was that proof that they were a superior species that surpassed humans?

Rather than that...

"... Hey, ah..."

Then suddenly, at the thought that floated in Ryner's mind, he let a voice slip without meaning to.

At that,

"Hmm? What's wrong? Do you want to eat dango after all?"

Tiir began, but Ryner didn't respond.

No, he couldn't answer.

The haze in mind up until now suddenly cleared at once with one thought...

Ryner looked at Tiir's eyes one more time.

Black eyes with a vermillion cross.

Like that, Tiir tilted his head in a curious and manner and looked at Ryner.

"Just what exactly is the matter?"

But, unsurprisingly, Ryner didn't reply.

Instead, he stared into Tiir's eyes.

Black eyes.

Vermillion cross.

"... Damn it. Geez, I'm such an idiot. I didn't realize such a simple thing until now."

Ryner spat out those words.

At that, Tiir made a troubled face, and,

"As I was asking, what are you suddenly talking about?"

He said that, but Ryner didn't answer.

Instead, he stared into Tiir's eyes, and like that, recalled words he himself had said once ago.

It was in the Runa Empire.

It was when he'd gone to save Arua who, simply because he was an **Alpha Stigma** bearer, had watched his parents be killed before him, beaten, injured, and turned into the army's research material.

The pursuing soldiers turned to Ryner and Ferris and said this.

"Bastards... that's our research sample! If you take it, you'll be recognized as a devil and you will suffer God's punishment!"

Back then, to that, this was how Ryner replied.

"... Did you just say... God's punishment? Because of these eyes, we'd suffer God's punishment...? When you do such cruel things and get no punishment at all, you say we'd get divine retribution just because of these eyes?"

He couldn't even be offended.

He couldn't even be furious.

Instead, there was only sorrow.

Again and again, over and over, witnessing the same miserable sight, there was only sorrow.

That was why his response was such.

But because of that, Ryner failed to see the truth.

Despite having possibility included the most important matter in his words, Ryner failed to see that.

Ryner's words continued.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it... what the hell is wrong with you people... You'd give us divine retribution? If so, then why did you even make us? If there really is a God, then answer me.

Why did you create me? The reason I was born... to toy with me for your

amusement, then deliver divine punishment...?

What a load of crap!

I'm not... we're not your toys.

You know, we're... alive too.

It's not like we wanted to be born as... such demons... as monsters...

It's not like... It's not like we want these eyes either..."

Right.

It wasn't like they wanted these eyes either.

Then why did that pattern arise in their eyes?

Why did they have these eyes?

Ryner stared at Tiir's eyes.

Black eyes.

Vermillion cross pattern.

That was the proof that they weren't human, but a superior species.

"....."

But was that way of thinking correct?

Tiir was an ordinary human.

Even with his black eyes, he was an ordinary human.

And that vermillion cross...

"....."

Isn't this vermillion cross the same as the engravings I've seen in so many people before?

It was the same as the human experimentation that Roland did.

It was the same as the magic circles inserted into people's bodies.

Only it was carved into the eyes.

But there was a problem.

Just who had done this and for what reason...?

Once again, he recalled his own words.

"Why did you create me? The reason I was born... to toy with me for your amusement, then deliver divine punishment...?"

"... I'm an idiot..."

That was to be expected.

There was no meaning in doing such a thing without a reason.

Then who?

For what reason?

"Tiir."

As Ryner spoke, Tiir made a long-suffering, relieved expression, and,

"Ah, finally, a normal conversation..."

But Ryner interrupted him and continued the discussion.

"You heard a voice descend from the sky... you said that earlier, right?"

"Yes, I said that. However, Ryner, you're rather focused on that detail, aren't you? As ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearers don't hear God's voice, most don't show any interest in it whatsoever."

Within those words, there were two keywords for the sake of advancing towards the truth.

First, ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearers didn't hear a voice descending from the sky.

Ryner had already guessed that.

Earlier, the words from the Gastark spies, Sui and Kuu.

On what seemed to be a hunt for Cursed Eyes, though they seemed knowledgeable about this sort of thing...

When Ryner's **Alpha Stigma** went berserk, they'd said this.

*"What—what is this guy? He's not an ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearer? That*

power just now... That voice just now. What was talking!? The others were completely..."

Different... it seemed.

Even when ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearers went berserk, it seemed that a voice didn't descend.

No, even without that, he understood that his was different from the ordinary **Alpha Stigma**.

Ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearers, after going berserk once, already couldn't be stopped without being killed.

But Ryner's consciousness, even after going berserk, returned.

That was why, because of this abnormality, Ryner became the Roland military's pet.

Furthermore, different from ordinary **Alpha Stigma** bearers, it'd appeared at Ferris's home.

Something that hadn't been seen by Arua but that Ryner saw.

Just what was that difference?

The difference with that aforementioned voice descending?

Ryner again contemplated.

"....."

A voice descended from the sky.

Just what was that?

According to Tiir, it seemed that **Iino Doue** bearers also heard a voice.

Furthermore, from within his mother's womb.

Those were the two keywords.

Tiir thought that the source of the voice was **God**.

But Ryner didn't think it was God's voice.

Moreover, he didn't believe in the existence of any gods.

Rather, if one said it was God, what exactly did that mean?

Roland didn't have any kind of religion, so he didn't know much... but ordinarily, it was supposed to be some omniscient being that governed peace, wasn't it?

That kind of decent situation didn't exist.

At least, a convenient god who could meddle in human's affairs didn't exist.

That wasn't a problem.

More than that.

Who the hell was that voice?

When Tiir was inside his mother's womb, he'd received this order from **God**.

"Have your first feeding. Devour this inferior human."

Was that the kind of thing **God** would say?

That couldn't be.

That definitely wasn't it.

That wasn't God.

Then, just what was it?

Ryner thought about it.

It was a dim memory.

After the **Alpha Stigma** crushed Ryner's consciousness.

After Ryner went berserk, a voice descended.

Someone.

Someone had spoken?

"God. Devil. Dark god. Hero. Monster. What will you call me? What will you call me? Hahahahahahahahaha—"

"You would kill me? With your power, you would kill me? You claim Elemio's paltry power would kill me? As little worms, crawling in your holes, you claim you would kill me? Ha, hahaha, hahahaha. Begone, begone, begone. Everything is nothing. Return to nothingness!"

"α [First] comes destruction. I bring forth nothing. I bless nothing. I save nothing. I just erase. Completely."

He remembered that.

"... Elemio..."

Ryner quietly muttered.

That was his lead.

That was what he'd continued to overlook up until now, the clue that would lead him to the truth.

At those words, Tiir looked puzzled, and,

"Hmm? Ele... what? What is that?"

But Ryner shook his head.

"... No, nothing. Let's continue."

However, Tiir smiled wryly at that.

"That's all right, but if we're not eating dango, then shall we move on? Standing around while talking is getting tiring, but more importantly, as our friends are waiting, I'd like to return to them as soon as possible."

"Eh, ah... yeah, right."

And Ryner began to walk.

At the end of the street that stretched out before them.

If they crossed the national border, they would no longer be in Roland.

Saying that, they were still in Roland's territory.

However.

"....."

Ryner looked behind him.

As expected, this way was also the scene of a street that stretched out ahead.

If he were to walk from here, Roland's capital would be about five days away.

But right now, that Roland felt so far away.

Even though back then, when he'd crossed the national border with Ferris, entering Nelpha, entering Runa, it hadn't felt that way.

Right now, it truly felt far...

Then.

Tiir, who'd walked ten steps away during the time that Ryner had spent standing, turned around with a surprised expression and spoke.

"... Having second thoughts?"

Ryner shook his head at that.

"No. I never liked this country much anywa..."

But Tiir interrupted him and spoke.

"That's not it, Ryner. I wasn't asking about that."

"Huh? What, then?"

Tiir smiled sadly. Again, an expression as if he were worried about Ryner from the bottom of his heart.

And he spoke.

"I was asking about your time in Roland. If you regret the time you spent with humans... that's what I'm asking."

At that.

Ryner's expression changed.

Again, Tiir gazed at him with a sympathetic face.

He didn't want to see that face.

That face from that guy.

But Tiir persistently spoke in a gentle voice.

"Right now, what you're thinking about—I can guess. All **Alpha Stigma** bearers think that in the beginning... because they don't hear that voice.

But that's not it. We're not human. No, let me amend that—we're a superior race."

Then, in the instant he said that, he made a thoughtful expression.

Tiir said,

"... Even if we were human. Even if we weren't a superior species... at the very least, we could never come to coexist with humans."

"....."

"... Shouldn't you know that better than anyone else? Remember the past. In spite of your wishes, they never responded. If you tried to approach them... you were only hurt. Isn't that right?"

"....."

And Tiir held his hand out to him.

"So take my hand. Or am I wrong?"

"....."

"You've always been suffering. But it's all right now. You no longer have to be troubled by anything. You aren't alone. You aren't alone in this world. You're not a monster who can only hurt those around him or a demon."

"....."

Again, he gazed at the street that stretched out before him.

He gazed at the sight of Roland...

It's far... he thought.

It was incredibly far.

Though he understood that feeling, he didn't know what to do about it.

To Ryner, Tiir—

"... You're a human on this side."

At that.

"... Yeah... that's right."

Ryner nodded, and again began walking.

And not a second time.

He didn't turn around.



It was the street that approached the border between Roland and Nelpha.

Ferris Eris stood on that street.

"... Muu."

She was deeply troubled.

She stared at the scene before her with clear blue eyes.

Shining in the light, long blonde hair.

White skin that seemed transparent.

A beautiful, delicate figure.

She truly was a beauty.

Anyone would call her that.

No, the people who passed by her, as she stood still on the street, whether they be man or woman, elderly or young, were all charmed by her.

But they didn't say anything.

Nobody said anything.

First, they were charmed by her abnormally shining beauty, and then immediately after, they saw the long sword by her waist that didn't seem like it could be held by her thin arms at all.

After that, they would see that on her back, she carried six, bulging, incredibly large backpacks.

And.

In spite of that strange appearance, her face was completely blank. As if not noticing anything, with an emotionless expression that seemed to have lost all feeling, she stared intently at the two tea houses before her...

"... Mumumumu,"

A troubled voice leaked out.

Everybody, when looking at her, thought this.

That's not normal. I don't know just what is so weird about this, but I know that something's definitely not normal...

And everyone avoided Ferris and went away.

Well, Ferris hadn't noticed any of that at all.

At any rate, she was terribly troubled.

Before her were two tea houses.

The tea house on the left was one she'd been to before.

It was a shop whose delicious dango was famous... Ferris hadn't been negligent in checking up on it.

More importantly was the shop on the right.

It was a shop she'd never seen before.

Perhaps it a new shop that'd been built while she was away on her journey.

But,

"....."

Ferris stared fixedly at that shop.

The sign itself was dirty. The wooden building also didn't seem to be new.

That meant that it'd already been around for a considerable amount of time.

But the news of a new tea house where one could eat delicious dango hadn't

reached Ferris's ears.

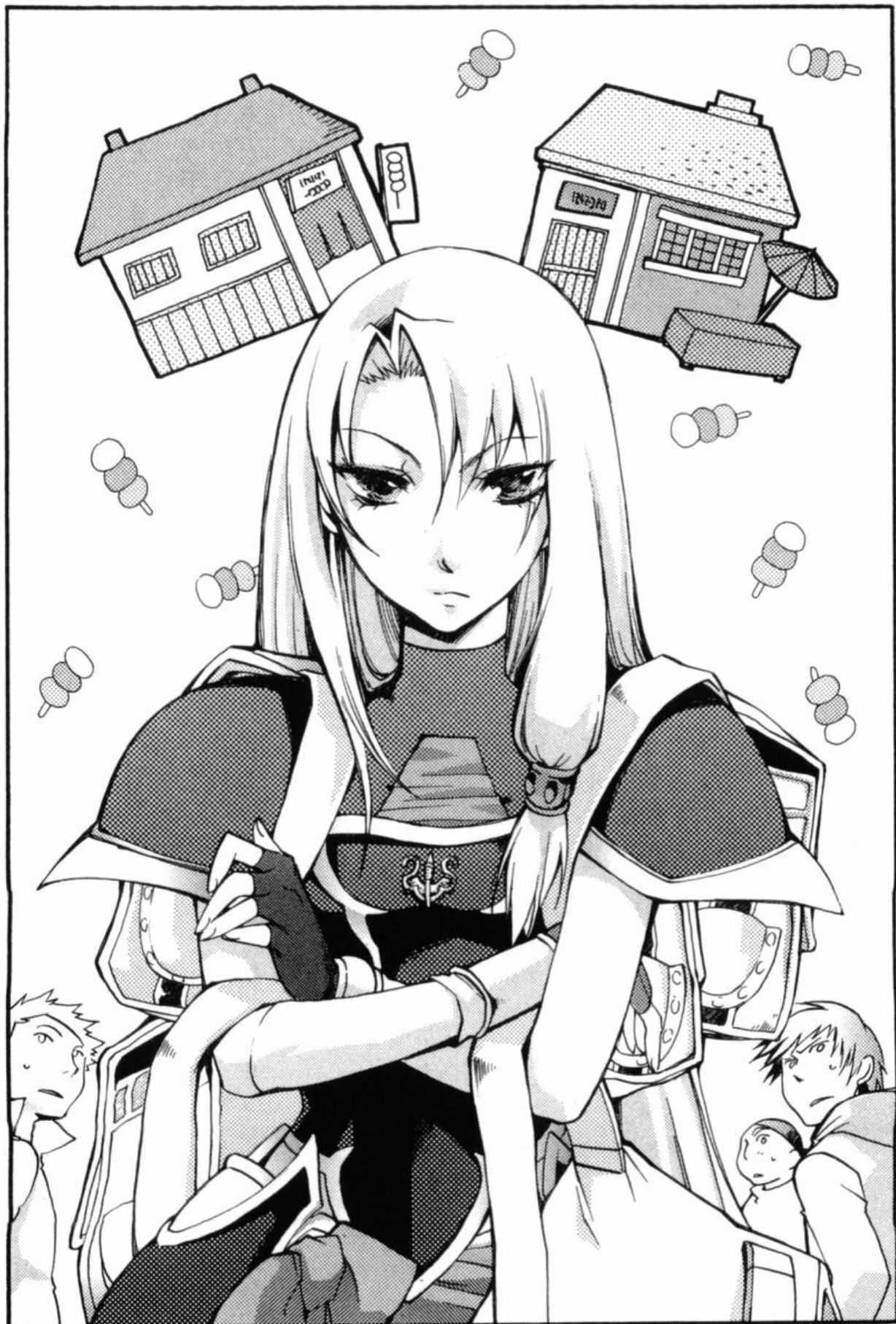
In other words, the flavour of this shop's dango, in all likelihood, wasn't very tasty...

Her thoughts began, but then Ferris, by herself, shook her head.

"No, no, hold on, Ferris. Think about this carefully. You must consider how they're operating beside a famous shop that carries delicious dango... Maybe, just maybe... mumumu."

This was a rather difficult problem.

This street was not often visited unless one was going to Nelpha.



That was why, if she could, she wanted to fill her stomach with the famous shop's delicious dango while she was here.

Of course, she could first test the new shop's dango, and then take out the usual tea house's dango.

She could finish eating one of the backpacks of dango she'd bought in Roland's capital, therefore freeing a backpack.

The amount seemed to work.

However, filling her stomach up with the dango she'd come here for had a completely different meaning from taking it out and eating it later.

But, as said, the new shop's dango... The chances were horribly low, but there was still a small possibility that she would miss out on eating delicious dango...

"... Damn... as I thought, it's not an easy matter to pursue the way of the dango..."

Ferris was troubled.

"... Mumu."

Ferris was troubled.

"... Mumumu."

Ferris was troubled.

"... Mumumumumumu."

And after all those troubles,

"All right, this one,"

She said, making up her mind, and entered the new shop.

She sat down on the bench left at the front of the shop.

She ordered tea and dango.

Taking the skewer of dango that were then given to her...

She bit into it and held it in her mouth.

In an instant, Ferris's eyes flew open.

"... Mu, this is..."

Spreading across her mouth, the dango's flavour.

If she had to express it, it was this.

The texture was dried out.

Its elasticity was hollow.

It was neither sweet nor spicy, and the scent of old flour filled her nose.

It was utterly horrible... It was impossibly bad dango...

Ferris trembled.

This was terrible. It was beyond bad. Already, she was unbearably angry.

She was irritated.

Where should she vent this anger out on?

What should she do?

And instinctively, Ferris shouted,

"... That damn Ryner!!"

For some reason, towards Ryner.

Or rather, here, the dango had been inconsequential from the beginning.

Her irritation had become worse in this place.

Shaking her arm off before her eyes, going with some man covered in black, his whereabouts unknown—she remembered the face of that Ryner...

"....."

Ryner's face arose in her mind.

His face at the last moment.

As if he were ready to cry at any moment and had given up on everything.

Feeling utterly distant from Ferris...

That kind of face.

But... she didn't want to see that face.

It wasn't for the sake of seeing that face that she was chasing Ryner down.

That wasn't it at all.

Though she didn't understand it very well herself, it was something very, very different...

Despite that, that guy made that kind of face.

And at that, she...

"... Haa,"

Ferris then let out a quiet sigh.

Like that, she stuffed her cheeks with the unappetizing dango.

No matter how bad it was, it was one of her rules never to waste dango.

While putting up with the unpleasant taste that spread across her mouth, she looked up at the sky.

While staring at the clouds that drifted from Roland to Nelpha,

"... Honestly. Just where did he go?"

She had just about no information.

Her only lead was the words of that human-devouring man covered in black whom Ryner had gone with.

"Ah... so it's necessary to explain from there... I'd heard that there were few of us in the south who possessed God's Eyes, and so far... Well, now isn't the best time to explain. Let's go."

"To where?"

"To where our friends are. I've come all the way here just for you."

That.

It seemed that that black-covered guy would be with his friends.

And judging from his declaration of *"there were few of us in the south who possessed God's Eyes,"* perhaps that black-covered guy's friends weren't here in the southern continent, but instead the central continent or northern continent.

That said, within the southern continent, if one left Roland, they'd likely head to Nelpha or Runa, and at any rate, she was heading to Nelpha...

Ferris redirected her gaze from the sky down to the neighbouring tea house.

The shop that was famous for its delicious dango.

In the beginning, when she'd heard the rumours, Ferris had immediately visited. And as the dango was, in fact, delicious, she'd been satisfied.

And the second time she came was because on Sion's orders, she'd gone on a journey with the suspicious Ryner Lute of unknown origins, who gave off the air of ten thousand years of laziness and was a sex fiend master.

When Ferris stuck the dango out to him, that eternally lazy and unsteady man's eyes widened, and, *"Wow, this is delicious!"*

He'd exclaimed such a thing.

That guy realized the power of dango.

"Amazing... What about it makes it so tasty?"

"Fufu."

"Is there something? The flour or something?"

"Fu, fu, fu."

"Okay, judging from that fearless laugh, I'm gonna assume you know the secret behind this dango's taste?"

"Mm-hmm. Of course."

"Then, what is it?"

"Fufu, do you want to know?"

"That's... Ah, but hold on a moment. Out of curiosity, is it a long explanation?"

"Mmm. Well, the gist of it is two hours..."

"Pass."

"Passes are banned."

"Ehhhh—? Then, while you're explaining, I'm gonna sleep... hey, why are you

withdrawing your sword?"

"Hmm? Didn't you read about school regulations before entering? Dozing off while in dango class equals death."

"What school!? Or rather, when did I enter this school!?"

"Have you forgotten? ... How shocking. Weren't you the one who said it yourself earlier? 'Wow, this is delicious! For this occasion, I'm entering the dango school...'"

"I didn't say thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!"

Ryner had exclaimed some cryptic thing, and while crying, begged, *Please teach me the history of dango*, and so she'd taught him.

That time had truly been fun.

She'd thought it was delicious, and Ryner had thought so too.

That time of happiness felt so different than from when she ate dango alone.

She'd been surprised at that.

For some reason, that shop's dango had seemed a bit more delicious than her previous visit.

"....."

And.

The third time she came here was...

Ferris held out her hand, looking at the inedible flour-ish dango.

And, if only Ryner were here, I'd force this dango down his throat, she thought such a thing.

Despite that, that guy was never by her side when it was important.

Honestly, he was truly useless.

Incompetent. Good-for-nothing. Lazy bum. A man who couldn't do anything at all.

That was why Ferris said,

"... Being alone... It's dull."

It was a curious sensation.

Even though she should have been used to being alone since long ago.

Ever since she'd been born, in the sword clan of the Eris House, for the sake of living up to their standards of strength, she'd always trained day after day.

She was always alone.

But she hadn't thought it was painful.

That was reasonable.

That was normal.

And so, she'd never thought that it was dull being alone.

Despite that, if that guy wasn't here...

"....."

Ferris again recalled what that black-covered man told Ryner.

"Now, let's go. Our friends are waiting."

At those words.

Ferris's hand that held the dango shook.

Friends?

Friends, was it?

That was what he said to that fool.

In that case, wasn't it strange?

Why did that guy look at her with that kind of face?

Your—

Your friend is..."

"... Me,"

She murmured in a quiet and utterly faint voice.

"....."

And then she returned the dango in her hand that she hadn't eaten to the dish.

It was the first time she'd ever left dango behind.

But right now, she didn't have much of an appetite.

She felt strange.

It was possible that due to eating such bad dango, her physical health might've taken a hit.

Honestly, how much old flour did they use to make this dango?

Feeling strangely suffocated, her chest hurt.

As if to shake it off, Ferris shook her head. Like that, she took out change from her pocket and placed it on the bench.

"... I'll leave the money here."

And standing up, she began to walk down the street.

From behind, the shopkeeper frantically—

"M-Miss! U-Um, you forgot your backpacks? On top of that, six of them..."

But Ferris looked over her shoulder at that, and said,

"... No, I won't be carrying those with me. I might be going on a long journey. Could you dispose of those for me?"

"Eh, um, if you're going on a long journey, isn't that all the more of a reason to bring lots... It's troubling if you leave behind..."

The shopkeeper began, but Ferris ignored her and started walking.

And a second time.

She turned around and...

"... Uu,"

She then said.

As she looked over, by her backpacks of dango that were a few steps away, two skewers of dango had been taken out.

"A-All right."

Again, she began walking.

This time, she vowed not to look back.

If she were to carry those heavy backpacks, she wouldn't be able to pursue Ryner.

"Damn you, Ryner. Don't think I won't find you."

And so, she left Roland.

Chapter 3: A key waiting up north, the southern gate

For some reason, it felt like time was slowly trickling by.

In the remote, peaceful village.

The people there were kind and never failed to smile.

It had a warm atmosphere.

Here, one could forget various things.

Within oneself, hatred, anger, and other such dirty things, one would utterly foolishly...

A remote village.

"The imperial capital of the Gastark Empire, Grenslade village."

Such like that, Kiefer was currently in a private house of the ambiguously named village.

Looking at her reflection in the mirror...

"... Uu, I've been tricked,"

She quietly groaned.

Bright red eyes, red hair of the same shade. Though her body was slender, there was a trace of roundness.

Above that, right now, she was clad in a womanly dress that was apparently of the highest grade in Gastark.

While staring and frowning at her figure in the mirror...

"... T-That Riphal guy... what was that about 'Wear the Gastark military uniform that'll be prepared'... I-Isn't this clearly a dress..."

Then, to the her in that dress, the house's lady said,
"Honestly, with that kind of pretty style, you're quite beautiful, Kiefer-chan!
My, this auntie approves!"

"Ah, no, it's not like that..."

"It's fine, it's fine! I say, if it's that Edea son, he'll definitely fall in love you with right away, no doubt about it!"

"Like I said... haa,"

Kiefer said, letting out a sigh.

By the way, the "*Edea son*" bit in the middle of what the lady said... though she meant the king of the Gastark Empire that, neighbouring the great country of Stohl, already seemed to have all the northern continent in the palm of its hand, Riphal Edea...

In this village, nobody called him king.

The Edea youngster.

The Edea boy.

The idiot son of Edea.

Or they addressed him by his name, Riphal.

Everything about this country was...

"Honestly, just what is..."

As Kiefer frowned and muttered that, the lady again seemed to misunderstand and went on.

"That's why you don't need to make such an uneasy face. Surely, that Riphal boy, upon seeing you, Kiefer-chan, will be amazed by your beauty!"

"Like I was trying to say, what King Edea thinks, I don't at all..."

She began, but unsurprisingly, the lady wasn't listening to her whatsoever.

After scrutinizing Kiefer,

"The ribbon's good. The sash is also good. Your skin is pretty and your make-up is flawless. My work is complete. Now, take care,"

She said, striking Kiefer's bottom. On top of that,

"Kya—"

Reflexively, she let out a shriek.

While rubbing her bottom that now hurt, Kiefer looked at the lady, who for some reason had tears in her eyes.

"Eh? W-What is it?"

At that, the lady happily nodded.

"It's truly all right for you to go off... with this, I can finally be at ease."

"... Heh?"

Not understanding at all what she was talking about, Kiefer accidentally let a foolish-sounding voice slip out.

However, as expected, the lady didn't pay that any heed.

She steadily continued.

"Honestly, that foolish brat—even though he's called king, he's a fool at his roots... For the sake of this village, for the sake of this world, for something you can only say is great, he's pushing himself too far... I've always been worried. But..."

Then, with teary eyes, she gazed at Kiefer, and,

"With someone cute like you, Kiefer-chan, becoming his wife, he also..."

"Wait, what are you saying—!?"

Kiefer shouted.

With a surprised face, the lady—

"Eh? What do you mean—aren't you two getting married?"

"Ha? Eh? What are you talking about?"

"That's what I heard... that Riphal boy said yesterday that he was getting married to you, Kiefer-chan, so the best dress..."

"That jeeeeeeeerk!"

Kiefer, tucking up the hem of her dress, began running.

Charging out of the house, she scowled at the neighbouring palace that the king of Gastark dwelled in.

"....."

No, there was no way one could call it a palace.

It was a tad larger than the other houses, but that was it. Only a slightly big wooden building.

This was what the villagers called this palace.

"The Edea house."

Riphal was the only one who called it a royal palace...

Walking briskly to that **Edea house**, Kiefer opened the wooden door.

There, inside the **Edea house**, there was a large room.

In the center was a large round table.

And the room's interior, as if looking down on the round table, was a place of the highest degree.

It was the throne.

No, unsurprisingly, the only one who called it a throne was Riphal.

Rather than a throne room, it was like one of those cheap wooden chairs that one bought along with a writing desk.

And in that chair, a single man sat with bad etiquette, with the back seat of the chair in the front.

Long, loose wavy hair. The colour, unique to Gastark, was brown... or better said, it was a peculiar peach-coloured shade.

His left eye, having been lost during the war with Stohl, was closed, giving off a calm impression in some ways...

Already on one side.

In the moment that Kiefer looked at his open right eye, she was taken in by it.

No, it would be the same for anyone, just by looking at his eye.

Dwelling in that eye was strong will and ambition... With that, a child's innocence also shone through.

Riphal Edea.

The supreme ruler of the northern continent.

The young king of the Gastark Empire.

Glancing at the ten retainers seated at the round table with a sharp eye,

"... All right, that takes care of this topic. More importantly, we have one another problem that we have to discuss."

At that, the man closest to Riphal at the round table nodded, and,

"Correct. This!"

That voice was tense.

Kiefer winced at that.

No, it was the first time she'd seen the people gathered here at the round table.

These past few days, Riphal had been spending his time leisurely in the village...

Speaking of things to do, regarding the obstacles of Kiefer who'd been frantically going to the library to investigate the secrets of Ryner's Cursed Eyes,
"Are you going to tell me about the Cursed Eyes?"

Saying such things like that, and then hours later,

"So, this is why I'm a surprisingly honest man. Did you understand?"

"Do I understand!? The Cursed Eyes!? What about the Cursed Eyes!? Why have you been going on and on about your character!?"

"Heh? Because I thought you wanted to know, Kiefer."

Saying that happily, he returned to the **Edea house** in good spirits—that kind of way was how he spent his time.

Frankly-speaking, it really didn't seem like he did any sort of tasks as a king at

all...

Right now was the first time he was doing his kingly duties.

The man by Riphal's side continued speaking to him in a reproachful tone.

"What is the meaning of this!?"

When it came to using honorifics towards their king, this village was unusual.

Plus, that Riphal's subordinate, with a sharp glint in his eyes, looked to be a sharp man.

Regarding his age, he seemed to be the same as Riphal, so around twenty-two or twenty-three. Unsurprisingly, he had Gastark's unique peach-coloured hair, and intellectual, almond-shaped blue eyes. Rather than Gastark's military uniform, he donned an unusual outfit with blue as its colour scheme...

Though she didn't know what rank would allow a person to wear that uniform, he'd been bestowed the seat closest to the king. He likely had quite a high ranking.

At any rate, his neighbours seated were elderly surpassing their sixties, all dressed in uniform.

It seemed that the audience here were people of high status.

Somehow, they had a refined air to them.

Nobles...?

But they were completely different from the nobles Kiefer was familiar with. Rather than seem repulsive, they had an honest and integrious impression.

Surrounding the round table like that, from Riphal to Kiefer, they became younger in age.

But regardless of young or old, man or woman, all of them advanced through the meeting with tense, serious faces.

What were they talking about?

"What's with this proposal!?"

As that was said, it was evidently a matter regarding Riphal.

That was why Kiefer, without making a sound, moved to stealthily leave the room.

The blue-dressed man spoke.

"Who in the world is this woman that Your Majesty brought with him!?"

In that moment.

Kiefer froze in place.

"Um... is this large problem... about me?"

N-No, it's obviously a large problem.

She was a woman who came from another country with unknown origins.

One would naturally think from the beginning that she was an assassin.

Or a spy.

Anyhow, it was to be expected that a traveller whom one coincidentally passed by wouldn't be overlooked so easily.

A development where Riphal favoured her and she immediately became his ally shouldn't happen.

Rather.

Kiefer thought as she looked at Riphal's face.

She had no idea for what reason this man made contact with her.

"Will you come with me?"

Saying that, he'd held his hand out to her.

Perhaps if I don't take his hand, he'll kill me. Kiefer had already seen this setup being done.

If she was a traitor, then she'd be killed.

It was that kind of relation.

And Kiefer took Riphal's hand.

The outcome she'd gained from that was that she had the right to read through the books of the Grenslade library as much as she pleased.

And that right was the only merit in taking on more risks.

At any rate, through only a bit of investigation through the books here, she'd made new discoveries not found in other countries.

Fairy tales and legends that were brimming with strange realities.

And descriptions of the Cursed Eyes.

She'd also heard about how this area was a unique place, where great quantities of ancient inheritance and relics had been left behind.

She didn't yet know anything in full detail, though...

At the very least, she wasn't able to hear about the black sword that Riphal had used in the war against Stohl.

His sword.

A black, abnormally long sword that was three times Riphal's height.

Its name was **Glovil**.

He offered part of his body as compensation towards that sword...

With just one swing, the sight before Kiefer's eyes changed.

Tens of thousands of Stohl's soldiers were easily wiped out.

But that wasn't the problem. What Kiefer wanted to know about was the voice that had echoed back then.

No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it descended.

As if echoing directly inside one's head, a voice descended.

It was...

It was just like when Ryner's eyes had gone berserk.

A voice resounded.

A voice resounded.

It was a majestic voice with overwhelming power that took a hold of one's body without thinking.

But it was what Kiefer had been searching for all this time.

"Answer. Answer. Come, offer thy compensation. In doing so, unleash my power."

Like that, the voice resounded.

And that sword devoured Riphal's left eye and slaughtered the Stohl soldiers.

"....."

It was abnormal power.

And that was Gastark's secret. If it were to be leaked out to an outsider, they should be killed immediately, right?

Without doubt, the world couldn't be allowed to know of Gastark's secret.

Sacred Sword.

Cursed Eyes.

Contract.

Hero.

And... God.

Riphal had spoken of such things.

In this library, such information existed.

A clue...

Perhaps here, there would be a clue.

Regarding the **Alpha Stigma**.

No, perhaps there would be a clue on how to save Ryner...

That was why Kiefer took Riphal's hand.

It was a given that she would betray him.

Once she gathered information, she would return to Roland.

Though she thought that...

"... Looks like it won't go that smoothly..."

But that was to be expected...

With an evidently displeased face, the blue-uniformed man was pressing Riphal for an answer.

To glare at his king with that strict expression... chiding the king who unwarily brought along a woman... It didn't look like that level of a situation.

Perhaps they'd already investigated Kiefer's origins and were proposing on how to kill her...

But then Kiefer shook her head.

Earlier,

"Who in the world is this woman that Your Majesty brought with him!?"

The blue man said that.

Who is this person?

That was to say, her origins had yet to be exposed.

However, even though they hadn't been exposed as of yet, they could be discussing on whether or not to torture a woman, or for what purpose she'd gotten close to Gastark's king.

In other words, to stay here...

"....."

Kiefer then looked at herself.

And she grimaced.

At her fluttering dress and high heels.

Like this, there was no way she'd be able to get away.

On the contrary, in these heels, even trying to leave this place silently would be a bit difficult...

Then, in that moment.

The blue-dressed man swiftly pointed in her direction, and,

"What's so good about that woman who was trying to sneak away from this

room earlier, and since then has been standing there, listening, and altogether acting in an extremely suspicious manner?"

I've been exposed!

Kiefer thought, inwardly swearing as a reflex.

All at once, those seated at the round table turned to look at her.

Then,

"Whoa, Kiefer, you're here!?"

Despite the current situation, Riphal spoke in a cheerful voice.

At that, as she was feeling uncomfortable, she stood up.

"... N-No... um... I didn't mean to interrupt your meeting..."

She began, but Riphal interrupted.

"Oh, it looks good! Even more than I expected. I thought that that dress matched your red hair, Kiefer, but they match even more than I expected. See, everyone, this is Kiefer Knolles. Isn't she beautiful? Since the current issue's about her, you should see her for yourself. Come on, come on, look, look."

At those words, everyone in the room scrutinized her...

"... Yes, if it's this."

"But if her beauty is all she has..."

"Has her origins been ascertained?"

Everyone spoke.

At that, Kiefer said,

"Eh? Heh? No, what in the world is everyone talking about?"

Riphal cheerfully smiled, and,

"Obviously, our marriage..."

"Which is why I'm asking what this is all abo..."

But again, her words were interrupted.

It seemed that interrupting others was a specialty of Gastark's people.

The blue-dressed man said,

"I utterly refuse to accept it!"

At that, Riphal responded to his companion's ill spirits with a coaxing voice.

"Well, well, you don't need to go all '*I won't accept it!*' in a stubborn voice like that—just look at her, Rize. Isn't she a beauty? I'm getting married to a beautiful woman. Isn't that every man's dream? That's..."

He began, but then the blue-dressed man... the man called Rize again interrupted, and,

"If it's beautiful woman, those are a dime a dozen. You're the king of this entire country, are you not? You can have whomever you choose!"

"Didn't I say that I don't want to because it's no fun that way? I want a bit of excitement in my love life, you know? That aspiration..."

"In that case, you're going to put a woman of unknown origins who could be a spy or assassin by your side!?"

Riphal grinned broadly.

"That's what makes it exciting, isn't it?"

"There's no reason for this to be a problem! Rather, why not those women... I selected plenty of beautiful women, but you wouldn't look at any of them."

Rize said; however, Riphal immediately scowled.

"Weren't all of those women you brought along women who'd already fallen in love with you!?"

"I thought you wanted an exciting love life, so if you think of it as a plundering game where you try to steal a woman away from me, then for a while..."

"Are you a moron!? I don't want your leftovers!"

"M-Moron? Did you just call me a moron? You, who's called the idiot son of the Edea family, called me, Gastark's greatest prodigy, Rigwaltz Pentest, a moron!? I can't put up with this anymore. I know. From here on, I'll recite your first love letter that you wrote when you were only twelve..."

"B-Bastard, why are you always picking a fi..."

"Fu—fu—fu. Then, here I go. Ah, *love's...*"

"I-I'll kill youuuuuuuuuu!"

Riphal said, forcefully standing up.

But at that, Rize—

"Ha—! It's fine if you kill me. See now, it's fine if you wish for that. But Riphal, in the moment that you kill me, I've prepared for copies of the love letter you wrote to be distributed to all of Gastark—you understand this as well, correct?"

"... Ah, guh."

Looking at Riphal, who moaned with a half-crying face...

Kiefer was weary.

It really was like a fight between children.

And the other people at the round table cheered them on as it swelled up while watching...

In the end, it was always the same here.

This country always, always acted like this.

A retainer who didn't think of his king as his king, and a king who wasn't like a king at all.

"....."

Is Riphal honestly the supreme ruler of the northern continent?

She was marvelling at such a thing.

Then Rize suddenly looked over his shoulder and spoke with a triumphant expression.

"It's like that, you know? His Majesty is an extremely forgetful man who, since he was twelve, four hundred and twenty-one times... no, now it's four hundred and twenty-two times that he's forgotten that I know all his weaknesses. In fact, because even my name of Rigwaltz was too long for him to remember, he ended up shortening it to Rize. With such a poor memory capacity, he surely... won't remember even your face, ma'am."

After saying that, he stared at Kiefer.

Like that,

"If you don't want to experience the sorrow of being toyed around by this man, then please leave..."

Interrupting him from behind, Riphal spoke.

"Why the hell are you deciding that for yourself..."

Rize cut him off.

"Because our king is a fool who won't use his head, it's my duty to work hard..."

Riphal interrupted yet again... It didn't seem like this squabble was going to end.

However, Kiefer already stopped listening.

From the beginning, her body felt strange from this conversation.

That was why Kiefer took in a deep breath, and,

"Please hold on for a bit!"

She said in a loud voice.

At that, the fight stopped.

Everyone in the room looked at her all at once.

After confirming that, Kiefer spoke,

"Er, so... I, with Riph... no, with King Edea—something like marriage, I don't inte..."

Then, over there.

"Riphal—!?"

From outside the room, a young female voice spoke, interrupting Kiefer.

At that, Kiefer clutched her head.

Honestly, people in this country never listen to the end...

But the girl's voice went on.

Behind Kiefer.

From outside the room,

"Help, Riphal—!"

It was a scream.

Sounding as if it were crying right now, it was a voice in which grief and despair were mixed.

Kiefer turned around.

But ahead of her, Riphal slipped by her and rushed out of the house.

Following him, Kiefer also exited.

There, on the open space outside of the house...

A man lay there, limp and collapsed, and hanging over him, crying, was a girl.

The girl seemed to be around thirteen? Wearing a pretty black dress that seemed to be designed to be easy to move around in, she was dirtied in mud and dust.

Her hair was also dishevelled, and unsurprisingly, her pretty, well-arranged face was dirtied with mud as well...

Her face scrunched up further, and,

"Riphal! Riphal! B-Brother is!?"

Regarding that, Kiefer looked at the man collapsed on the ground.

And...

"... How awful."

Instinctively, she turned her face away.

The man whom the girl called brother was injured horribly.

His injuries were bad enough that it was amazing he was still alive.

From his shoulder to his chest, it was as if a beast had devoured and torn it to shreds, gouged deeply...

Around that wound, it seemed that somehow, ice was covering it.

In response, Riphal—

"Kuu! How many days have you been freezing his injuries!?"

But at that, the girl called Kuu shook her head.

"I-I don't know. I don't..."

But then, the collapsed man on the verge of death said,

"R-Riphal. I'm fine... m-more importantly, Kuu needs to re... st... she's... been using the scythe's power all this time to bring me here..."

"Stay awake, Sui! You can handle these injuries, can't you? Then..."

Then, moving past Kiefer, Rize also came out.

And as soon as he saw the man collapsed on the ground called Sui, he made a high-pitched whistle with his fingers... In an instant, three men clad in black hoods appeared around him...

At that, Rize—

"Prepare for an operation. Use the holy cave."

"Understood."

The black-hooded men dispersed.

But Rize didn't pay them any heed and again stared intently at Sui.

"Just who did..."

But Riphal interrupted him and shouted.

"This isn't the time for that right now! Don't talk, Sui. I'll definitely save you, so just hold on."

In response, Sui said in a weak voice,

"... N-No... I'll... talk. This might be the last time I can..."

"Don't say such stupid things! Don't be ridiculous. You won't die, no matter what! Damn it, is the cave ready yet!?"

Looking at Riphal who was frantically calling out, Kiefer felt like crying.

It was clearly too late.

Sui's injuries were fatal.

That would be obvious to anyone's eyes.

Despite that, Riphal frantically called out.

Sui, looking up at Riphal, smiled.

"As usual, Riphal, you're... too noisy..."

"I told you not to talk! If we quickly bring you to the holy cave..."

But Sui shook his head and looked as if he wanted to say something; however, without saying anything, he sighed. Like that, he looked up at Rize, and, "... Rigwaltz... as expected... I don't have the strength to talk idly. For me... persuade... the king..."



At that, after appearing deep in thought for a while,

"... Your Majesty. Your decision,"

Rize said curtly.

But it was in a completely different tone from before.

And he called Riphal "Your Majesty".

Your Majesty...

"....."

With only that, Riphal's face became tight.

It was the sort of expression that indicated he was trying to endure a heavy pain.

This was this king's true face.

Kiefer knew that face.

When he'd swung that sword and killed the Stohl soldiers.

When he'd killed people for the sake of protecting this country's secrets.

When he'd nevertheless advanced forward on top of those sacrifices, this kind of expression had appeared.

And he was to make a choice.

What would be the most needed?

What would be the most correct?

He narrowed his eyes, and then to Rize,

"To Kuu."

With only that, the message seemed to have transmitted to Rize, who struck the back of the neck of Kuu, who was clinging to Sui.

"Ah..."

She only managed that much.

As Kuu lost consciousness, Rize gently lifted her body, and,

"... You've worked hard. Sleep soundly now,"

He whispered that.

After confirming that, Riphal looked at Sui.

Sui made a relieved and peaceful expression.

"... T-Thank you. For Kuu to see my death..."

"... Don't decide that you're going to die. We're preparing the holy cave, aren't we? As soon as you enter it, there's a chance that you'll be saved..."

However, Riphal frowned, and,

"... But troublingly, the chances that you'll die are high..."

Sui smiled at that.

"... That really is troubling, huh..."

Then once more the black-hooded men called by Rize appeared.

"The holy cave has been prepared."

The holy cave... though Kiefer didn't understand at all what that was, it seemed that if Sui was brought there, there was a chance that his fatal wounds would heal.

But at that, Riphal—

"It seems that the holy cave is complete... but we can't bring you there right away. There's a chance that you'll die... so..."

That was his decision.

As a king, that was his decision.

When he made that decision, he didn't falter.

Urged by Rize, he immediately decided.

A king who didn't falter, and...

Unbelievable people.

Sui accepted Riphal's words as if they were utterly obvious.

"... If Your Majesty says so... that's a relief. To be honest right now... I doubt

I'll survive..."

And he smiled.

It's impossible, Kiefer thought.

Subordinates who would easily throw their lives away for their king.

Without being ordered to, without hostages involved, they would throw their lives away as if it were only reasonable.

This was this country's strength.

This was the strength of Gastark, who'd conquered the northern continent with overwhelming power.

The soldiers would give up their lives for their king.

And the king as well would sacrifice his own body to move forward.

They wouldn't stop on their path.

Once they had the northern continent in their hands, next would be the countries in the central continent.

And eventually, Roland as well...

Then.

Sui spoke.

"... A Cursed Eye monster that we were hunting... in the southern continent..."

At those words.

Kiefer's thoughts were interrupted.

"....."

Southern... continent?

A Cursed Eye monster that they were hunting?

What is he talking about?

W-When he says Cursed Eye monster, he can't mean Ryner...

At that, Riphah said,

"Then these injuries are because of that monster!?"

However, Sui shook his head.

"... No, this wasn't from Tiir Rumibul... Riphal, you also... understand, right? He can't win against us."

He said such a thing.

At that, Kiefer—

"... Tiir Rumibul...?"

She said in a quiet voice others likely couldn't hear.

What was Tiir Rumibul?

The name wasn't something she'd heard before.

But judging from what was said, it was the name of a Cursed Eye bearer they were pursuing?

Sui went on.

"But... he's dangerous... It seems... he's gathering the scattered Cursed Eye bearers..."

Riphal continued those words.

"... Ah, damn it. So he means to oppose us, who've hunted down Cursed Eyes? Then, the scope?"

"That's still... but it seems that in Nelpha... they've gathered—that's the information we gained... so Brother..."

"... Lir? But he should be in charge of Roland..."

There. Without thinking, Kiefer let a voice slip.

"....."

But they continued.

Riphal spoke.

"... It won't be a problem if we leave the **lino Doue** to Lir. But if that guy wasn't the one who did this to you, then who the hell..."

At that.

"An assassin from another country... uses a **Rhule Fragmei**... but it's the same type as the Ring of Lightning Beasts that Brother uses..."

Immediately.

Riphal's expression changed.

Making an expression of utter despair,

"... Which country? Nelpha? Runa?"

"... The... **Rhule Fragmei** used... isn't exclusive to one country..."

Riphal further frowned at that.

"... Just as thought, the south... the gate's... it's where the gate is."

"... That's still... but first, it's likely..."

Etc., etc.

Though she was listening to all of these unknown words, Kiefer couldn't understand their conversation at all.

"Rhule Fragmei"... and "Lightning Beasts" and "Gate", etc.—she couldn't follow whatsoever.

But she could guess that something significant was happening in the southern continent...

Then, all of a sudden.

Sui spoke.

"About that... in Roland... there's a monster by the name of Ryner Lute."

Immediately.

Kiefer's mind blanked out.

W-What did he say?

Ryner Lute?

W-Why is this guy saying Ryner's name...?

Riphal spoke.

"... Ryner Lute? Who the hell is he?"

What were these two talking about?

She couldn't understand.

Why did things suddenly become like this?

Who was Ryner?

Even though Kiefer had gone on a journey to investigate that. Why was this suddenly...

Just who was he?

And how could he be saved?

In order to investigate that, Kiefer had gone on a journey.

She'd left the southern continent.

Then she'd come up all this way to the northern continent on the other side...

However, she heard his name again here.

Kiefer trembled.

After all, perhaps in this place, there was the answer she'd been seeking all this time...

Sui spoke.

"Just from looking... he seems like a normal **Alpha Stigma** bearer... but I've never seen that kind of monster..."

But Riphal already seemed to understand everything by that point. His expression changed further, which Sui looked at, and, "Ah... as expected, Riphal, what he is..."

Riphal nodded.

At that, Kiefer's body stiffened.

He knew.

What Kiefer wanted to know so badly.

Riphal knows!?

And as he opened his mouth...

"... Ah—"

Kiefer noticed it.

Sharp blue eyes.

Rize was staring straight at her...

He interrupted Riphal.

"... Your Majesty. From the beginning, the outsider here..."

At that... *This is bad*, she thought.

Rize was staring in her direction.

Not at Riphal, not at Sui—he was glaring at her.

But from when exactly?

From when had he...

That answer immediately came.

Rize spoke.

Staring at Kiefer,

"... *The southern continent*... When those words were said, your complexion changed, didn't it?"

Kiefer wanted to cry at that.

He'd been watching her from the beginning.

In this kind of situation.

In this kind of situation where his ally might die...

He'd been constantly watching to see which parts of Riphal and Sui's conversation she reacted at.

"Next was *Roland*. And after that, you reacted at *Ryner Lute*..."

Then, a smile arose in Rize's face.

"... This has become quite interesting, hasn't it? Someone quickly take Sui to

the holy cave. It seems we'll be hearing the rest from this lady..."

He began, but then.

Kicking off her heels, Kiefer began to run.

Somehow, she had to escape this place...

However.

Rize grabbed her hair. Like that, he pulled back, and furthermore, moved to punch her stomach...

"Gah!?"

A pained voice arose.

But it wasn't Kiefer's voice.

Rather, Riphal leapt from behind and punched Rize's face...

"R-Riphal, you bastard, what are you doing!?"

"What do you mean, what am I doing!? Why the hell were you about to punch a girl's stomach? Not to mention the stomach that could one day carry my child!?"

"H-Haa!? Are you seriously saying that?"

Riphal laughed at that.

It was the smiling face of an eternally carefree child.

"... Didn't I say it before? That I wanted an exciting love life?"

Then, he looked this way.

"... But if we're to talk any further, even though I didn't want to just rudely ask about a girl's past... it seems that that's impossible now, huh?"

As he said that, he now made a regretful, sad expression.

"But relax. I don't care about the past. Even if you're a spy from another country or an assassin who's come to kill me, if you become our ally now... you won't have to worry about anything, Kiefer..."

And he stared at Kiefer with a gentle gaze.

However, he spoke in a low, sharp voice.

"... So? What will you do?"

There were two options.

Again, it was as before.

Sell out information about Ryner?

Or die?

"....."

Letting out a sigh, Kiefer looked up at the sky.

And though it was the sky of the northern continent, it was also the sky of the southern continent where Ryner was, wasn't it?

She thought about such things.

After thinking that, she regretted it.

"... Ah, geez, I feel like crying. Ryner's too far away from here..."

Then she looked at Riphah.

And the choice she made was...

Chapter 4: A heart not overwhelmed by despair

They were on a trackless path.

Passing over the border of the Roland Empire, they'd entered Imperial Nelpha, and after travelling north for a while, they changed their route to the west partway through.

And moving off the street, through a trackless path where tall weeds grew thickly, Ryner and co. moved forward.

"... Hmm,"

Ryner said, arms crossed and deep in thought.

While frantically pushing through the weeds in front of Ryner, Tiir—

"... Ryner, just what have you been troubled by these past several days?"

"... Mu—n."

"... Are you ignoring me? No, rather, though I understand that ever since we met, you've been troubled over learning that you're not human and various other devastating truths... in the end, I don't think they're things you need to be troubled over?"

However, Ryner continued to look up at the sky.

"... Mumumumumu."

Tiir let out a sigh at that. And in a somewhat reserved manner,

"... That's... Then, at the very least, you could push away the weeds in front of you and walk a bit faster... Well, we're almost at our destination regardless..."

At those words.

Ryner looked at Tiir's face.

Tiir made a relieved expression, and,

"Ah, you finally feel like listening to me..."

He began, but Ryner didn't hear the end of his words.

Instead, Tiir's eyes.

After staring at the vermillion cross...

"... Elemio."

At that, Tiir's expression curved.

"That again? As I asked, what exactly is this 'Elemio'? Ever since then, you've continuously muttered that again and again, Ryner... Ah, could it have something to do with a lover?"

He said such a thing.

"Lover?"

Ryner replied.

Again, Tiir made an expression like he'd been saved.

"Ah, finally, a response! So was I correct? Ryner's lover..."

However, Ryner again ignored Tiir by that point. Looking up at the sky, he muttered,

"Elemio... lover... Yeah, it definitely sounds like a female name..."

"So it's not the name of your lover? Then just what exactly... Never mind, you're looking at the sky again..."

He began, but Ryner interrupted him.

"Tiir."

"Finally!? You finally feel like listening to me..."

"I'm busy thinking about something right now, so you could just be quiet for a while?"

"Ehhhh!?"

He raised his voice, before speaking in a sulking tone,
"... No, it's fine, I suppose? ... Though it's fine... we'll be reaching our friends
almost immediately..."

He said that.

It seemed they'd be reaching where his friends were soon.

The same as Ryner, **Alpha Stigma**... No, the settlement where Cursed Eye
bearers were gathered.

But that was why he had to think about this now.

Right now, that was the truth that Ryner had continued to overlook.

The truth that he'd never thought about, in spite of it being in the palm of his
hands.

What exactly were these eyes?

That kind of thing.

"....."

With his finger, Ryner folded over his own eyelid.

What are these eyes?

Right now, Ryner had a bit of a guess.

It was the words that had descended when Ryner's **Alpha Stigma** went
berserk.

*"You would kill me? With your power? You claim the likes of **Elemio's** power
would kill me? A worm crawling in its hole would claim to kill me? Ha, hahaha,
hahahahahaha. Begone. Begone. Begone. Everything is nothing. Return to
nothingness."*

"... Elemio."

"Again, that... if it's not a woman, is it a man? Is that your preference, Ryner?"

Though Tiir said that in a shocked voice...

It wasn't a person's name.

No, he didn't think it was a person's name.

If he recalled correctly, it was the name of the tool that the spy from Gastark, Sui, used.

The **Elemio Comb**.

Sui had called it that.

As when Ryner went berserk, his **Alpha Stigma** easily disintegrated that **Elemio Comb** and Sui's arm, there was some kind of unknown, hidden ability...

It was likely a type of Heroes' Relic.

Regarding that Heroes' Relic, his **Alpha Stigma** had said...

*"You claim the likes of **Elemio**'s power would kill me?"*

What was that?

The source of that voice that descended.

The name of the Heroes' Relic, **Elemio**... No, it spoke as if it entirely understood even its existence.

In other words,

These eyes.

They were a type of Heroes' Relic?

"....."

But then, Ryner's expression trembled as he folded his arms in a troubled manner.

"... But if that's the case, the mysteries increase, huh...?"

"... No, I think Ryner's the mystery here instead..."

Tiir said such a thing in a tired voice, but unsurprisingly, he was ignored.

From there, there were more important matters.

That voice that descended.

Regarding the comb that Sui used,

"The likes of Elemio's power ..."

It'd said.

But what did that mean?

The likes of Elemio.

Maybe it mean the likes of the Elemio's comb, or...

The power within the comb... maybe it was someone within the comb who was called **Elemio**...?

Within the comb, there was someone named Elemio?

"... Geez, there's a mini-god inside the comb? This is becoming more and more like a fairytale..."

Ryner smiled wryly at his own words.

But depending on whether the comb possessed a unique power or there was someone dwelling within the comb, the truth differed completely.

Did the comb possess a unique power?

Was there a mini-god dwelling inside the comb?

To put it in another way, it was like this.

Am I personally a monster...

Or is there someone sleeping inside my eyes, making me kill people...?

The voice that descended.

"God. Devil. Dark god. Hero. Monster. What will you call me? What will you call me? Hahahahahahahahaha—"

The voice that descended.

"α [First] comes destruction. I bring forth nothing. I bless nothing. I save nothing. I just erase. Completely."

Even though he didn't want to hear it, that voice echoed within his head.

But he felt that it was a voice that came from him. As a mad monster, it was his own voice.

However, Tiir had heard that voice as well. It wasn't a voice that belonged only to Ryner.

Within his mother's womb.

It echoed in Tiir's mind.

"Have your first feeding. Devour this inferior human."

It suddenly gave that order.

Kill others.

Kill others.

Your important people as well.

Your loved ones as well.

Destroy everything around you.

However, you who's giving those orders...

"... Who the hell are you?"

Then.

Tiir, who was pushing through the weeds with all his might, looked over his shoulder with a surprised expression, and, "... Eh? Er, Tiir Rumibul—I introduced myself quite a long time ago..."

At that, Ryner hurriedly said,

"No, no, no, I didn't mean you."

"Not me? Then..."

He said, restlessly looking around at their surroundings. Confirming that there was nobody else, he suddenly made an expression like he'd realized something, and, "D-Don't tell me, Ryner, that you're on strange medicine?"

"I'm not, I'm not."

"But you were seeing hallucinations earlier..."

"I wasn't hallucinating."

"That's no good, Ryner. Only those inferior humans use drugs..."

"I told you, I don't take drugs!"

Ryner shouted, at which Tiir looked concerned.

"If so, then that's a relief. If you were on drugs, then you wouldn't be able to meet with our friends until they wore off."

After saying that, he again pushed through the weeds before him, and then spoke.

"Now then, almost there. Soon, we'll arrive at where our friends are."

In response, Ryner looked through the weeds that grew over their heads.

It was a destination about two days away from the road.

Suddenly past the weeds that grew as they pleased, there was a small, isolated building there.

Looking at that house, Ryner spoke.

"Huh? ... The Cursed Eyes... no, not that. That's the settlement where the God's Eyes bearers live... All things considered, it looks to be a pretty tight fit in that one building..."

For some reason, Tiir happily smiled in what seemed to be excitement.

"Finally... Finally, you've started asking me normal questions, Ryner."

"No, just hurry up and answer, would you?"

"Of course. To make this a proper conversation, I'd have to respond with something. Then, what is it?"

"Liiike I said, for a settlement where all of the God's Eyes bearers in the world live, it looks kind of shabby to me."

"Ah, that. Well, that's because this is a temporary residence."

"Temporary residence...? Hoh. Then, your base is elsewhere?"

"Yes. In the central continent..."

He said.

Ryner looked at Tiir and spoke.

"Then, is this tiny thing the God's Eyes bearers' southern branch of operation?"

However, Tiir denied that.

"No, we have no interest in the southern continent. We intend to leave this place in a few days."

"Heh? Is that right? Why?"

"Because our task has been complete. We've finished gathering most of the God's Eyes bearers in the southern continent... Afterwards, we'll be bringing them with us and returning to the base."

"... Hmm. I see,"

Ryner said, nodding in understanding, at which Tiir again smiled cheerfully.

It seemed that he was sincerely happy over the idea of Ryner finally meeting his companions.

"....."

However, Ryner had complicated feelings over that gentle expression.

"Inferior humans."

When he'd spit those words out, he'd acted in a completely different manner than the one he displayed towards Ryner.

But just what made him hold such strong prejudice?

Of course, if one considered humans' attitude towards Cursed Eye bearers, he understood his reason for hating humans, but...

"....."

Ryner looked at the cabin before him.

It was a wooden cabin, out in the middle of nowhere, built as if to reject human civilization.

Unsurprisingly, it seemed that the Cursed Eye bearers gathered here thought in the same way as Tiir?

That they were superior and that humans were an inferior existence.

It'd be fine if all humans were to die—they'd think such things, wouldn't they?

Or else their leader... the one who commanded the group made up of the Cursed Eye bearers gathered from around the world coerced the other Cursed Eye bearers into thinking that way?

Though either way, it's gonna be tough hanging with them, huh? Ryner thought, frowning.

Like that, he looked at Tiir and asked,

"... Hey. You're going around, gathering all of the God's Eyes bearers in the world, right?"

He nodded.

"Yes, that's correct. In spite of being inferior beings, because of the humans who persecute us, we have to protect our friends. That's why I've become leader and am gathering those with God's Eyes from around the world."

Ryner narrowed his eyes at those words.

The topic of the leader.

But regarding what was said,

"... Then, Tiir, you're the leader of the group of God's Eyes bearers?"

"Correct?"

He nodded easily.

But in response, Ryner stared at Tiir with half-closed eyes, and,

"So?"

He said.

Apparently not understanding, Tiir tilted his head to one side.

"Hmm? 'So?' And? What?"

"Don't 'what' me. You lied just now, didn't you? You're not the leader."

At that, Tiir's eyes widened in surprise.

"Uwa, you realized? You're amazing, Ryner. How in the world did you know?"

"No, how much I've realized is..."

After speaking in a surprised tone, Ryner mimicked Tiir's tone earlier, reciting,

"... *'Because our task has been complete.'*"

In that moment, understanding dawned on Tiir's face.

"Ah, that's right. This was my mistake. Task... task... correct. Certainly, I'm moving under orders. I'm not the leader."

In response, Ryner spoke with half-closed eyes.

"Hey, hey... what's this—don't you think this conversation's taken a weird turn...? What was with that whole '*I refuse to lie to a friend*' thing? Suddenly you're lying, huh?"

But Tiir laughed. Without any signs of shame whatsoever,

"No, it's not quite a lie. After all, for the time being, you could say I've become the leader in terms of appearance."

In terms of appearance.

In other words, someone else was leader in actuality... but for the sake of concealing that, Tiir was acting as leader.

That mean,

"... Is there a threat?"

Otherwise, there would be no reason to expressly hide it.

Of course, one could say that humans were a threat, but with the incredible power Tiir possessed, it didn't seem like the other party would be those

humans.

In that case, an answer emerged.

A group that Tiir had to hide his and the other's leader from.

An enemy that they feared.

"... Gastark?"

In that instant.

Tiir's expression changed.

Bulls-eye, it seemed.

Tiir looked surprised, and then made a happy face.

"... This is... amazing... though I've been vaguely sensing your competence as we travelled together, Ryner, I wasn't expecting this much. To know that our allies with sharp minds like you are increasing, the leader will surely be happy..."

But Ryner wanted to clutch his head at that.

The group that Tiir and co. had created were opposing Gastark.

No, if he'd thought for a bit, he would've known that already.

After all, Gastark was hunting down Cursed Eyes and going around pursuing Cursed Eye bearers. Considering that, there was no way they wouldn't go after a group made up for Cursed Eye bearers.

And.

If the Cursed Eye bearers fought with Gastark, they'd likely be easily defeated.

As strong as he claimed Tiir to be... that was when up against ordinary humans.

Ryner recalled the tools that the assassins from Gastark... Sui and Kuu possessed.

Heroes' Relics... though they'd called them **Rhule Fragmei**...

Granting its wielder tremendous physical capabilities, and furthermore freezing its opponent, there was the **Ailecrono Scythe**, and a dagger that could

turn one's arm into a dragon by stabbing it, and release fire from its mouth...

"....."

No, as they couldn't understand how to use the latter, it was something Ryner and co. had discarded...

But anyhow, those guys used powerful, hidden tools of currently unknown magic implementation.

And against that, the Cursed Eyes...

For example, Ryner's eyes—the **Alpha Stigma** had the ability to immediately understand the structure of all magic, copy it, and cancel it out.

Though Tiir's **Iino Doue** had a different form, it seemed to be the same ability in the end. Devouring the other party's magic, it converted that power into raising one's physical capabilities.

But Heroes' Relics... they demonstrated a completely different notion from magic.

Even if he looked at the Heroes' Relics with his **Alpha Stigma**, going by its structure, he couldn't tell at all whether it was going to release fire, ice, etc.

In other words, the compatibility between Heroes' Relics and magic was the worst.

Even if Tiir possessed monstrous power, there was nothing he could do against an opponent that didn't use magic.

Rather, without depending on Cursed Eyes, by fighting with ordinary magic, there still seemed to be a chance at victory.

In reality, Ryner, with Ferris, had been able to repel Sui and Kuu...

But Tiir shouldn't be able to do that.

His eyes continuously devoured the seirei that normally existed within the atmosphere... It seemed he wasn't able to shift the location of the seirei in order to cast magic.

That was to say, he couldn't use magic.

With that, how would a fight with Gastark go?

Ryner asked.

"... By the way, have you fought with Gastark?"

"....."

Tiir was silent.

But with that alone, Ryner knew the result.

And not for the first time, he thought it was a relief that he didn't take Arua with him. There was no way he could bring him along to a dangerous group that would be Gastark's main target.

On the contrary, this group...

"... In other words, you're an anti-Gastark faction?"

It was when he asked that.

There was the sound of something banging.

"What was that?"

Ryner said, turning towards the source of the noise.

As the door of the cabin at the front of the weeds opened, a sole boy came out.

Black hair that reached his shoulders, black eyes.

He was still young.

Around four or five years old?

The child dazedly stared this way towards the clump of bushes...

Then, gazing at Ryner and Tiir, a delighted smile broke out across his face, and,

"Ah, ah, ah, ah! T-Tiir-niichan!?"

Exclaiming that, he began running this way.

In the moment that he raised his voice, four more children rushed out of the cabin, and as soon as they looked in this direction, they ran with such force that it wouldn't be strange if they fell...

"Gyaa!?"

"Owww!"

Two people fell...

No, well, leaving that aside.

The fallen children immediately got up and dashed towards them.

And one by one, they jumped at Tiir.

In response, with a kind smile and while stroking the children's heads,

"Were you waiting?"

Tiir said, to which one girl cried out with a face like she was about to cry,

"Y-You're late, Tiir!"

Furthermore, a boy—

"We've been waiting for so, so long!?"

At that, as Tiir stroked their heads,

"I see, I see. Have you all been good while watching the house?"

At the question, all of the children nodded at the same time.

"I-I've been good..."

"I've been extra good!?"

"D-Didn't you eat my cake without asking!?"

And other such things.

More than at the children's noisiness, he was surprised at Tiir's manner.

His gaze and voice gave off a sense of kindness that Ryner had never seen.

Tiir looked towards Ryner, who was watching in wonder.

And,

"... Earlier, Ryner, you asked if I've fought with Gastark, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

Ryner nodded.

While gently stroking the children's heads, Tiir said,

"... Of course I have. And I ran. My friends were killed before my eyes one by one. That time, there were children just like these who were there by chance... but there was nothing I could do. Thirty-eight people... and every single one of them was killed. Killed, with their eyes gouged out... but I couldn't do anything."

A pained expression.

Staring at Tiir, Ryner—

"... Is that why you hate humans?"

But Tiir shook his head at that.

"No, I've hated humans since I was born. As they're able to receive orders directly from God's voice, **Iino Doue** and **Will Heim** bearers know the truth of the world from the beginning.

We can never live in harmony with humans.

But the other bearers of God's Eyes are different. Like your **Alpha Stigma**, and the **Torch Curse** and **Ebra Crypt**... each and every of the God's Eyes bearers who don't hear God's voice live while being scorned and persecuted...

They like humans.

You as well, correct? Ryner. You still like humans. Am I wrong?"

At that,

"Yeah,"

He nodded frankly.

Tiir smiled.

"... Thank you for giving me an honest answer."

"Hmm? Not gonna correct me?"

"There's no need to."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll change that naive way of thinking soon enough."

"You think so?"

Ryner said, at which a smile arose in Tiir's face, and,

"... Children were killed before me with their eyes gouged out. Back then, the humans cheered... They called out, saying they'd exterminated the monsters. Saying that they'd successfully collected seventy-six Cursed Eyes... they laughed."

Like that, he looked away from Ryner and began stroking the children's heads once more.

And,

"... I don't want these children to have to hear that ugly laughter anymore. They've suffered enough up until now.

Monster, demon, abomination...

After constantly called these things again and again, there were children who wouldn't even raise their faces or speak when I found them.

And everyone said the same thing.

I'm a monster, but I don't want to hurt those important to me.

I'm a monster, but I don't want to hurt those important to me.

But..."

Then Tiir lifted his head and looked at Ryner.

His face was strained with sorrow.

He spoke with a bitter voice.

"... Just who are the monsters here?"

Ryner didn't answer.

There was no reason to.

Because all of it hit close to home.

"....."

Called a monster.

Called an abomination.

Scorned as taboo, despised...

But he hated that.

I don't want to be called a monster anymore.

I don't want to kill anyone anymore.

I don't want to be hurt anymore.

I don't want to hurt anyone anymore.

So I can't—

So I can't be with anyone...

"....."

And he averted his eyes away from the world.

He wore an expression like he didn't care about anything at all.

He became apathetic towards everything.

He put a wall around himself.

Because he didn't want to be hurt, he didn't make contact with others.

Because he didn't want to be hurt, he brushed away hands that reached out to him.

And he ran.

He ran.

He ran.

If he continued to run, he truly would come to feel nothing.

He'd become closed off to everyone.

No matter what happened in the world, he wouldn't care.

Instead, he only slept each day.

Instead, he only spent his time idly, meaninglessly.

"....."

Ryner watched Tiir, who was playing with the children.

Without looking at Ryner, he spoke.

"... I want to protect these children. I want to create a world where these children can smile... so I'm truly glad to have a capable friend like you."

And as Tiir smiled,

"Welcome, Ryner Lu..."

He began, but his words only made it that far.

A boy—

"Capable? Friend? Ah, this guy's a friend!?"

Another boy said,

"What, what? Which eyes? The same as our **Alpha Sti...**"

Furthermore, a girl said,

"That doesn't matter! More importantly, what's your strong point? Your specialty?"

They rapidly fired questions.

While being overpowered by their energy, Ryner—

"Ha? Eh? Specialty? Um... what are you talking about?"

The girl made a *can't you guess?* frown, and,

"Geez, tag, hide-and-seek, and things like that!"

"Ah, right, that kind of specialty..."

"By the way, you know, Tiir-niichan's specialty is playing house!"

"A-Are you serious!?"

Ryner said, and with a sincerely shocked expression, he looked at Tiir, who merely smiled.

However, the children didn't stop.

"So, what's yours? Please hurry up and answer."

At those words.

After pondering this for a while, Ryner spoke.

"... A-Afternoon naps?"

Regarding that, the children all glanced at each other.

"This guy's useleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeess!"

"No, even if you all say that together..."

But then, from behind the children,

"... Afternoon naps are nice, Ryner-san. I like them too."

Suddenly, a voice spoke.

Ryner looked that way.

Over there, there was, unsurprisingly, with black hair and black eyes, a boy... no, an adolescent? A bit younger than Ryner, he seemed to be around fifteen or sixteen.

At that, Tiir said,

"Lafra? Just as you said, Ryner was in an Estabul inn."

Regarding that.

"Estabul inn?"

Ryner frowned.

An Estabul inn.

That was where Ryner first met Tiir.

Tiir killed the inn's landlady... and then Ryner had gone with him, betraying Sion and Ferris.

But,

" *'Just as you said'*... what does that mean? How did you know that I'd be in Estabul? Is that the ability of your eyes?"

In response to the question, Lafra smiled, before closing his eyes. And upon opening them again, within his black eyes, two vermillion dots appeared.

Vermillion-coloured dots lined up.

Just like the **Alpha Stigma** and **Iino Doue**, it was a vermillion pattern.

Ryner looked at that, and,

"... That's definitely not the **Alpha Stigma**."

"Yes. It's different. My eyes are the **Ebra Crypt**. They replace a person's dream."

"Replace a person's dream...? So, what does that mean? You can see other people's dreams?"

"Yes."

Lafra nodded.

But Ryner tilted his head further at that.

"... When you say dreams, you mean *those* dreams? Those you see when you're asleep..."

"Those dreams."

"Only those?"

"Only those."

"Hmm... but that... what can that do?"

Lafra looked up at the sky, appearing to be recalling something.

And—

" 'What manner of unfulfillable dreams... has such a hideous monster seen?' "

"... Wha—"

Immediately, Ryner's expression changed.

Those words.

Those were the words Lucile told Ryner...

"Y-You... why do you know about that!?"

Lafra, with an apologetic expression,

"... I'm sorry. Ryner-san, your dreams... just a little..."

"You peered into them!?"

At Ryner, who instinctively shouted, Lafra made a flustered face.

"... Y-Yes... to put it accurately, my dreams were replaced with your own, Ryner-san... b-but please don't worry. Because of the distance, I couldn't understand most of those dreams' content. So I only saw fragments of your dreams, Ryner-san."

Though he said that...

"....."

Just by looking at his expression, Ryner was already fed up.

His expression.

A seemingly-weak face that was easily hurt.

It was just like looking at his own face from once ago.

Only by looking at that, he knew how he'd been treated up until now.

The power to peer into people's dreams.

The power to peer into the wishes inside a person's heart.

The power to peer into what people didn't want others to see.

There was no way he'd be accepted with that.

Creepy.

Don't come near.

Don't come near, monster.

He was—

No, they continued to say that...

"... I'm beat,"

Ryner muttered without thinking.

Lowering his gaze, he looked at the children.

It seemed that the children who, during the time when Ryner and Lafra were talking, were completely absorbed in playing around Tiir and calling out, possessed the **Alpha Stigma** like Ryner...

Everyone here was a Cursed Eye bearer.

And their expressions were at ease.

Lafra's expression was at ease.

And perhaps his own expression was at ease.

"....."

Honestly, everyone here was friends.

Even if they had different eye types, everyone felt like they were the same.

Because they liked humans, they got close, but because they liked humans, they moved away.

Then, Lafra—

"... Just as I thought, you're a kind person, Ryner-san."

"Huh? Why do you say that?"

Ryner grimaced.

But Lafra smiled, and,

"I peered into your dreams, and despite your ill thoughts, immediately after being angry, you made a sympathetic expression. As I thought, you're kind..."

"I'm not kind, geez."

"That's not true."

"So why are you saying..."

He began, but Lafra interrupted.

"... Perhaps you haven't realized yet... but we **Ebra Crypt** bearers are searching for the God's Eyes bearers scattered around the world,"

He suddenly began talking about that.

Though Ryner had no idea what made him so kind...

The topic changed slightly.

People shouldn't be able to tell others they're kind face-to-face like that.

It's embarrassing!

At that.

"....."

If he truly were kind, then before he could hurt another person, he'd have killed himself.

He was a monster who killed those important to him but wasn't able to die.

With that, what...

Ryner cut his thoughts off halfway.

Looking at Lafra,

"In other words, you've been searching for us Cursed Eye bearers by peering into our dreams? But shouldn't it be simple to locate us, then?"

Lafra smiled wryly.

"No, it isn't. That's why dozens of **Ebra Crypt** bearers, day after day, have been steadily peering into others' dreams. And if information regarding the God's Eyes bearers arose, together we all look into the dreams of the surrounding areas... and then repeat that. On top of that, if the distance really is great, the information we get from peering into dreams comes in fragments, so it's difficult."

"I see."

Ryner nodded.

That was to say, during the dreams Ryner had when he was asleep, Lafra had gotten a hold of information somewhere along the lines of *Ryner is at an Estabul inn...*

No, that wasn't it.

Before Ryner went to Estabul, by peering into his dreams, he'd likely learned something like *First he'll leave Roland, and then go to that Estabul inn.*

With that, Tiir had headed over to where Ryner was.

But if that was the case...

"....."

Then a question arose in Ryner's mind.

According to Lafra, he and the others were peering into others' dreams, and from those dreams, if information about God's Eyes bearers showed itself, they would then look into the surrounding people's dreams.

However, if that were the case...

Why hadn't they noticed Arua?

If they discovered Ryner, wasn't it strange that they hadn't discovered Arua at the same time?

Or was the truth that they couldn't get much out of the dreams, as they were in fragments, and were only able to discover Ryner by chance, and that Arua hadn't come up in the dreams of the people surrounding Ryner... something like that?

Well, he didn't think that that was impossible.

First of all, even if it were a dream, though many of a person's wishes and illusions would appear... he didn't think they'd gain too much accurate information, but...

"You... just how much of my dreams did you see?"

Lafra smiled, and,

"You're a kind person, after all, Ryner-san."

"Still going on about that? You're not making any sense."

"No, I intend to explain in order. You really are kind..."

"Like I said, stop calling me kind! It's embarrassing to hear!"

Lafra laughed at that.

Furthermore, Tiir, who heard that, laughed as well.

"Lafra, you shouldn't tease Ryner so much."

"But I'm moved by Ryner-san's kindness. I really wanted to express that... Ah, then I'll speak in a quiet voice so that no one can hear, and then Ryner-san doesn't have to be embarrassed..."

"It's embarrassing! What's with you? You're really irritating."

Ryner began, but as Lafra smiled innocently, he approached him.

It seemed he earnestly intended to express his thoughts on Ryner's kindness.

Tiir laughed.

"I'm glad to see that you're getting along so quickly. Then, we'll be heading inside. I can't neglect making dinner, can I? Ryner can stay here for a while and deepen his friendship with Lafra..."

"No way in hell!"

With a cheerful expression,

"Now, now, Ryner-san. Don't say that,"

Lafra said, having gotten a hold of Ryner's sleeve at some point...

"Y-You, don't get so friendly..."

He began, but unsurprisingly, Lafra spoke with a cheerful face.

"... Then, let's go to a place where no one else is so that, regarding Ryner's kindness, I can..."

"I told you to stop that!"

As Ryner shouted, Lafra laughed.

Then looking behind them, he confirmed that Tiir had gone into the cabin...

"So, shall I begin?"

"I just said, don't..."

However, before Ryner could finish, Lafra spoke.

"... The reason I didn't call Arua here..."

At that,

"Y-You..."

Ryner stared at the adolescent before him.

He knew about Arua.

From Ryner's dreams, he knew about Arua's existence.



But he hadn't gotten Arua to come here.

"....."

No...

Then, Ryner looked towards the cabin.

Behind the cabin's closed doors, he couldn't hear much of even the noisy children's voices.

And Lafra's words from earlier.

"No, I intend to explain in order."

Explain in order.

What was the meaning of that?

Ryner again looked at Lafra.

"... So, what is it? That you wanted to talk about without Tiir knowing?"

Again, Lafra made a smiling face.

"Then from here, shall I talk about how much of a fan I am of your kindness, Ryner-san?"

At those words, Ryner pressed a hand against his forehead, as if feeling a headache coming on.

"... Ah, damn it. I don't want to do this, but you're gonna explain properly, right?"

"Fufu, I will, yes."

Lafra laughed cheerfully.

Ryner let out a sigh at that.

"Then, just summarize the praise about me."

"Ehh!? That's the main part, you know?"

"Then omit it and make the side story the main part."

"Su~re,"

Lafra said, crossing his arms and looking troubled. After being quiet, deep in thought, for a while, "... The truth is, I found you quite a while ago... but despite that, I didn't tell our friends that."

"... Hoh? And why is that?"

"Because you were special. It was the first time I'd seen someone like you. Though I don't want to brag, compared to the **Ebra Crypt** bearers, my abilities are superior... I've found many God's Eyes bearers. Of course, they were all **Alpha Stigma** bearers as you are... but you were completely different from the other God's Eyes bearers. I was fascinated."

"... Different? How so?"

Lafra grinned.

"You're incredibly kind."

Ryner immediately grimaced at those words.

"No, that's enough with that."

But with a serious expression, Lafra—

"No, it needs to be said. You're kind... though you may hate being told that, Ryner-san... I've been watching your dreams this entire time. Of course, since you were far away, I couldn't understand most of them. Only fragments of information came through. However... nevertheless, your feelings made it through. Negative emotions so strong that they made me, an onlooker, want to cry and sob.

Anger, sorrow, hatred, despair...

Treated like dirt, feared, growing more and more, ever so lonely.

Being afraid of hurting others.

Being afraid of getting hurt.

Wishing you were dead, wishing you could go mad, being tormented by such feelings."

"... So what about that makes me kind?"

But Lafra smiled. Looking at Ryner, he smiled. A simple, cheerful smile.

"And yet, what ultimately dominated your heart was... the cry that you loved people."

"....."

"You always ultimately desire to protect those dear to you. You're sick of being alone. You love people. You love everyone. You may be a monster, but still... you want more, more and more, to mingle with people..."

"... I wouldn't say that I'm that soft-hearted,"

Ryner said bitingly.

But Lafra again just smiled at that.

"No. You're soft-hearted. You're so kind that it's sad."

"... That's enough, you know..."

"So weak, so lonely, as you continue to cry. *I hate being alone. I hate being alone. I'm lonely. Someone save me. Someone save...*"

"I told you that that's enough, didn't I!?"

Then finally, Lafra stopped.

However, his pleasant, cheerful expression remained.

Looking at Lafra's smiling face,

"....."

Ryner again couldn't say anything.

He was utterly like a reflection of Ryner, always smiling and smiling.

However, Ryner wanted to turn his eyes away from that smiling face. Because, as to be expected, Ryner understood it.

The truth was that he was miserable. The truth was that he wanted to cry. But he smiled. Nothing mattered anymore, and so he merely smiled instead...

Regarding that,

"... You... hey. Don't say that stuff with a face like you're gonna cry..."

Ryner said in an exasperated voice, to which Lafra again laughed,

"Ahaha,"

His voice was sad.

Even though his face was smiling, he now spoke in a sad voice as if he were about to cry.

Despite that, he looked at Ryner, and,

"... You really are a lonely person."

He said such a thing.

Ryner frowned. Staring at Lafra's sad smile,

"Who is? The ones that hates being lonely? That wants to protect those dear to him? That loves people? Isn't everything you just said really about you?"

Lafra easily nodded.

"You... and I are like that. That's why I called you here. Because I wanted salvation."

"For whom?"

Ryner asked, to which Lafra again looked towards the cabin, and,

"For Tiir,"

He said.

In response, Ryner also looked towards the cabin.

Then, as the door opened, a girl who hadn't come out before and looked to be one or two years younger than Lafra, "Lafra-niichan, Tiir's made dinner!"

Told him in a loud voice.

At that, while waving a hand with a smiling face,

"... And I want salvation for her. For the children here. For our friends gathered in the central continent. And for you as well, Ryner-san..."

And within his eyes, his curse appeared.

A vermillion curse.

Scorned by all as taboo, despised, and feared. Eyes in which a vermillion

pattern arose.

Lafra gazed at Ryner with those cursed eyes, and,

"For the sad bearers of God's Eyes, who have lost faith in humans... I want you to save them all,"

He said with a sad smile that never faltered.



It was incredibly quiet there.

Perhaps because they were so far away from human civilization.

All that could be heard was the sound of the wind.

The sound of the wind brushing through the weeds.

And the children's sleeping breathing.

"....."

It was the dead of night, with everyone having fallen asleep.

Tiir, Lafra, and the children were all sleeping. So that he wouldn't wake them up, Ryner quietly, quietly got up.

And he exited the cabin.

In the area outside the cabin, without any man-made source of light whatsoever, there was darkness.

But that wasn't to say that it was pure darkness.

There weren't many clouds in the sky.

The moon also shone through.

Rather, it was bright out.

Looking up at the sky where the moon and stars shone, Ryner spoke.

"... Is the reason I can't fall asleep because of the bed quality...?"

But that shouldn't be it.

If it were the same as usual, then as soon as he got into bed and closed his eyes, he should fly into the land of dreams.

Despite that, today...

Even if he closed his eyes, he couldn't fall asleep at all.

Immediately after he closed his eyes, Lafra's words would again and again...

"For the sad bearers of God's Eyes, who have lost faith in humans... I want you to save them all."

Again and again, he remembered them.

Ryner frowned.

Then he turned around.

The snug wooden building.

Inside were four **Alpha Stigma** bearers.

Boys, girls—people who shared the same loneliness as Ryner.

Like a large family of eleven people, they'd gathered around the dining table and eaten the dinner that Tiir prepared.

His cooking was rather delicious... while eating it, everyone smiled.

Everyone welcomed Ryner with smiling faces.

Laughing while joking around, the children smiled playfully.

There... it looked as if there were no troubles.

There were no problems.

If it was a place where he belonged, then it was fine, wasn't it?

He thought that.

In spite of that...

"For the sad bearers of God's Eyes, who have lost faith in humans... I want you to save them all."

Again, he recalled Lafra's words.

Ryner wanted to clutch his head at that.

"... Me, save the Cursed Eye bearers?"

He'd never thought about such a thing.

No, as a monster who could only hurt others and whatnot, he'd never even thought about being saved.

He hated hurting people.

Despite thinking that, because of that, there was no worth in being saved when he held these cursed eyes...

"....."

Ryner recalled the children, who continued to be noisy throughout dinner.

Lafra made a joke, and the girl who'd informed them of dinner only looked at him...

A boy spoke.

"Ah, Pueka-neechan's only looking at Lafra-niichan again..."

"Wha—d-don't look at me!"

"Gyaa—! Pueka-neechan hit Lafra-niichaaan!"

That kind of ordinary scene.

A happy sort of scene.

But all of those children possessed cursed eyes...

"... I can't say that as a cursed monster, there's no worth in being saved and things like that, huh..."

If he said that, then that would mean the children wouldn't be saved.

"....."

But he wanted to save them.

Those noisy, troublesome brats...

Ryner felt that he wanted to save them.

And upon realizing the feelings he had,

"Uwa, give me a break... with this, I really am the soft-hearted idiot that Lafra

was talking about..."

He looked towards the cabin.

Towards the cabin where the children were sleeping.

And,

"... Seriously, things have become pretty troublesome..."

Ryner let out a weary sigh.

Even though things had been so simple in the beginning.

He was nothing but an **Alpha Stigma** monster.

Why do I have to think of myself as only that? He'd thought.

Without these eyes.

Without these cursed eyes, I—

Why do I have to think of myself as only that?

That's...

"....."

Then.

Ryner stopped thinking.

The sound of the wind.

The sound of the grass.

He felt that something else was mixed in with that sound...

Looking over at the bushes,

"... Who is it?"

From within the bushes,

"Ah, even though I erased the signs of my presence, I was discovered so easily... as expected from one who was once called a genius of Roland, hmm?"

That voice.

It was one Ryner had heard before.

"You're Milk's subordinate..."

From within the weeds, a single man appeared.

Unsurprisingly, he had a calm face that Ryner recognized. A tall, narrow body that was taller than Ryner's.

Though he looked to be around twenty-four or twenty-five years old, he had pure white hair as if all the pigmentation had fallen out.

And he wore Roland's army uniform.

The man smiled.

"Luke. Luke Stokkart. A member of the **Taboo Breaker** Pursuit Squad. Though I am Captain Milk's subordinate..."

A smile arose in Ryner's face at that, as he interrupted.

"You're under the direct control of Sion, from whom you received the orders to kill the **Alpha Stigma** monster, Ryner Lute?"

Luke spoke with a remorseful expression.

"... Ah, so you know that much...?"

Without thinking, Ryner's expression changed, as he tried to deal with it.

Because he understood what Luke's response just now meant.

As he thought, it was true.

The letter that had been delivered to Ryner's inn.

This was what had been written there...

First.

*Search and collect any Heroes' Relics that the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, Ryner Lute, overlooks.*

Two.

*Observe the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, Ryner Lute.*

Three.

*Should the **Alpha Stigma** bearer, Ryner Lute, go berserk outside of Roland or*

show any traitorous behaviour—Erase him...

It was true that Sion had given Luke those orders.

Rather than being some kind of scheming trick from someone within Sion's circle, it was the truth.

Luke spoke.

"... Does it hurt?"

But Ryner shrugged, and,

"Not really. It's only natural. Sion isn't in the wrong here, you know?"

Luke smiled sadly.

"... Yes. That he isn't in the wrong... if you understand that, then please die."

"And if I say that I don't want to?"

"That would be troubling... I'd be a bit chagrinned by that."

And he turned his eyes past Ryner and towards the cabin.

"... God's Eyes... was it? There are quite a few of them here. That so many are gathered in one place, the circumstances here..."

He began, but then stopped.

"... Ah, well, that's how things are now."

In response, Ryner glared at Luke.

What Luke said just now.

God's Eyes.

If it were God's Eyes...?

Just what...

"... Bastard, since when have you been spying on things here?"

Luke easily said,

"... From quite a while ago. I believe it was already about thirty hours after you crossed Roland's national border and entered Nelpha that I caught up and began following you..."

"....."

Regarding that, Ryner's entire body tensed.

Right now, it'd been five days and nights since he crossed the border with Tiir.

If that was the case, then that meant Luke had been observing Ryner and co. for over three days.

However, Ryner hadn't sensed his presence at all.

Even though Luke had been observing and shadowing them for over three days, he hadn't been noticed whatsoever.

The significance of that...

Ryner stared at Luke intently.

"... You bastard, you've been hiding your real power all this time, haven't you?"

But Luke only shrugged at that.

"... Ah, geez, this suuucks."

Ryner said, clicking his tongue, before he began to lower his stance.

Gathering all of his power, he prepared to fight...

However, Luke, unsurprisingly, didn't seem particularly on guard, and,

"Regardless of what you do, you can't win against me."

"... Heh. Unlike usual, you seem pretty confident, huh? Are you saying you're stronger than me in some way?"

But at that,

"Far from it. I'm weaker in every way. Should you know as well, Ryner-san? Against the famed genius mage of Roland... I'm no match. In neither magic nor physical combat am I an opponent at all,"

Luke easily said such things.

Ryner laughed scornfully at that.

"... Ha. Isn't that also one way of fighting? To make me lower my guard..."

"That won't be necessary. Even if I didn't do such a thing, this will be my victory."

"... That's not possible for you."

Luke smiled at him as if he were a complete idiot, and,

"... Ah, the young. Though the outcome of this match has already been decided... well, that's enough. Then, shall we do this?"

At that.

Ryner saw, in the clumps of bushes in front of Luke.

There, skillfully camouflaged, magic circles had been set up from some point ago.

Magic traps.

Furthermore, of a considerably high level.

If it were a normal fight, Ryner would've been able to notice...

But Luke had said too much.

"The outcome of this match has already been decided..."

In other words, he'd already set everything up for his fight with Ryner.

And just as expected, it was magic traps.

A smile broke out across Ryner's face, and,

"You'll regret your overconfidence there,"

He began running.

And in one leap, he jumped over the magic traps before Luke...

Immediately.

"Eh, uwa, you've already seen through it... damn it."

Luke frowned. He retreated back a step as if to escape.

However, Ryner didn't stop. As Luke fell back at twice the speed...

Then.

"... So it's like this. Hey, kill him..."

Saying that, Luke smiled.

In that moment, someone caught Ryner's leg.

"Wha!? Don't tell me you've got allies...!?"

He instinctively exclaimed, before looking in that direction.

But with that, it was over.

On the ground, there was nothing but a rather classic trap. One step ahead of the traps that Ryner had seen through.

There, what had caught a hold of Ryner's leg, tied from weed to weed, was a simply crafted trap...

Ryner had been tripped up at that.

And because of Luke's words, he'd misunderstood and thought there was a new enemy.

The result was—

"Checkmate."

Luke swung the knife he held towards Ryner's neck...

"... Ku—"

His voice wouldn't come out.

He was too skilled.

Overconfidence? You'll regret your overconfidence there?

The idiot here is me.

All of his movements and all of his words, to the very end, had been in preparation for slicing at Ryner's neck.

To the very end, Luke's overconfident talkativeness and even Ryner seeing through his magic traps had been leading to this trap.

My chances of winning...

But then, as if seeing entirely through Ryner's thoughts, Luke spoke.

" 'My chances of winning are none... is that what you're thinking? After being caught in such a simple trap tied between the weeds, the difference in true power is too great... is that what you think? However, that's a mistake. Truth be told, you're strong. Even if it seems that I may be overwhelmingly strong... I'm only playing a part. So come now, if you truly are someone of power, then you should easily be able to steal the knife away from me and kill me, should you not?'"

He said such things.

"....."

With those manner of words, he couldn't bring himself to move.

Perhaps it was true, and he might be able to easily steal the knife.

No, judging from Luke's movements up until now, just by looking at his behaviour, his ability didn't look to be very high. If he wanted to steal the knife, then maybe he could.

But that was something Luke had easily admitted to...

He couldn't move.

Just what was the truth and what were lies...

But even that was a trap.

"... Then, let's end this."

Luke firmly swung the knife down.

But he couldn't move at all. Misled by Luke's words, his judgment was too slow. His body's tension had loosened.

As if aiming at that gap in his tension, the knife swung.

"... Gah—"

Ryner twisted his body.

To avoid the knife, Ryner frantically twisted his body.

But there wasn't any time.

Death.

Death drew near.

Already, there was nothing that could be done...

"....."

And just before death, Ryner saw it.

As if cutting through the darkness, the angel that appeared.

Long, shining golden hair.

Almond-shaped blue eyes.

Abnormal beauty.

Pretty, he thought.

Up until now, Ryner didn't even think he'd see such beauty in his life.

No, anyone who saw it would think that.

But the angel didn't smile.

With a completely blank face, it swung its sword, and at that sword—

"Ha? Hey... Why is that coming my way—gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!?"

He felt that when it hit, it was a missed sensation, and without knowing what was what, he was crushed onto the ground.

In too much pain to immediately stand up,

"... A-Are you trying to kill me, Ferris!?"

He shouted.

Ferris pressed a foot onto that Ryner, and,

"Hmm? Ah, you're here?"

"... U-Uwah. Somehow, I missed you saying stuff like that... I remember being trampled by you... Gua!?"

At that point, Ferris stepped on Ryner's head.

And,

"Hmm? Ah, you're here?"

"I'll seriously kill you... gukya!?"

"Hmm? Ah, you're here?"

"W-What the hell are you... guoaguwa!?"

"Hmm? Ah, you're here?"

"N-No, just hold on... bowaguhaaguhaa!?"

"Hmm? Ah, you're here?"

At that, Ryner was already speaking with a half-crying face.

"S-Sorry. Y-You're angry, huh? You're definitely angry? Um, I'll apologize for everything, so please hold on for a bit. I-I'll treat you to dango. Hey? Okay? D-Don't kill me... gukyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

He was going to die now.

That was what Ryner thought.

Ferris finally seemed slightly satisfied, and,

"... So, just what exactly is going on? Why is that man trying to kill you?"

In response, Luke stared at Ferris.

"... You've finally caught up, Ferris-san. Have you been following behind me this entire time?"

"... Wha... bastard, my tail..."

Then.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!?"

Now, a scream arose, but from a different place.

At that, Ryner and Ferris—

"Hmm?"



"Hmm?"

Simultaneously, they turned towards the source.

It was the cabin.

If he recalled correctly, it was the voice of the girl who liked Lafra, Pueka.

While standing up, Ryner said,

"Sleep-talking... Isn't that a little too loud?"

Ferris stared at him with an incredulous expression, appearing to shake in fear.

"D-Don't tell me you had the girl leave the cabin and go to a distance place so that you could attack..."

Continuing, Luke said,

"Ah, that's new. It can't be that a new spell was developed..."

"Are you two morons—!? Doing that..."

He said, but as he was saying that, the cabin door opened. And the children fled in this direction.

Everyone was crying.

The boy who was being noisy earlier and three girls—they were all crying.

And furthermore, behind them, Pueka and Lafra exited.

Regarding that, Ryner said,

"H-Hey, Lafra, what the hell..."

"R-Ryner-san... please run away! Y-You'll be killed!?"

"Killed? B-By just who..."

However, Ryner's words stopped there.

Upon seeing the monster who was chasing Lafra and the others rush out of the cabin, he lost his voice.

He saw shapes made completely of light... no, lightning.

The shapes of lightning took the form of beasts who attacked Pueka from behind...

"Damn it!"

Ryner groaned, as he began to run.

But there wasn't enough time.

Fast.

It happened too fast.

The beasts of lightning opened their mouths...

"Move iiiiiiiiiit!"

However, at that.

From the side, Lafra pushed Pueka out of the way.

The beasts of lightning then changed their paths to Lafra.

There was time!

Just after.

"Lafra, run this way!"

But Lafra looked at him...

For some reason, he smiled.

That sad smile.

As if he'd given up on everything, as if he'd reached the point of despair. It really was the same smile Ryner once had.

And he spoke.

"... Your promise, Ry..."

"Forget about that, just hurry up and take my hand..."

But he didn't move. Instead, he gazed at Ryner, and,

"... I'm glad to have met you. You'll definitely keep your promise..."

His words only made it that far.

The beasts of lightning that had changed their route reached Lafra several times faster than Ryner did.

Their fangs devoured his upper body. And as if Lafra's body were some kind of toy, they tossed it to the ground.

Ryner's outstretched hand... the hand that held onto nothing cut through empty air.

He looked at the ground.

Lafra was—

Lafra was... looking in Ryner's direction. Again, that sad, smiling face.

His face was smiling sadly, but he was no longer moving.

"... Ah..."

In that instant, Ryner didn't understand what was happening.

Everything before him became pitch black.

Instead, only a scream resounded.

The children's screams.

Screams, screams, screams, screams, screams, screams, screams!

And seared into his face, Lafra's smile.

"For the sad bearers of God's Eyes, who have lost faith in humans... I want you to save them all."

His utterly cursed smile that was seared into his face went around in Ryner's mind.

"You're a kind person, after all."

"... Tha... that can't..."

I don't understand.

I don't understand!

Why did things turn out this way!?

What the hell is happening...

Then.

Before Ryner's eyes.

Pueka, who'd fallen to the ground after being pushed by Lafra, turned this way.

And she looked at Lafra.

At the beasts' feet.

She looked at the bloodstained, utterly motionless Lafra.

"... N-No..."

Her eyes opened wide.

"No... n-no, no, no, no, no, n... o... o—"

Black eyes.

In their centers, a curse began to glow.

That cursed pattern.

"Ahh, ahhhhh..."

A cursed vermilion five-star pentacle arose.

Powerful.

Powerful.

Powerful.

The **Alpha Stigma** went out of control.

"S-Stop! Wait! I beg of you. Wait!"

But she didn't stop.

"Ahhh,

She began to laugh madly.

"... Damn it!"

Ryner started to run.

There was still time.

If she was still at this age, if her consciousness hadn't yet been severed, there was still time.

She could still be saved.

In that moment.

For some reason, a voice echoed.

It was Lucile's voice.

"What manner of unfulfillable dreams... has such a hideous monster seen?"

Shut up.

"You should know this already. The bloodstained hands of a monster like you can't grasp anything..."

Shut up!

Ryner held his hand out towards Pueka.

There was still time.

There should still be time.

I'll save her.

Even if it's my hand, if...

Even if it was the hand of a bloodstained monster, if a life could be saved with it...

Ryner frantically held out his hand.

But that hand was—

"Whoops, I've gone through a lot of trouble for this crystallization, so could you not be a hindrance?"

Before him, a single man appeared.

A sharp, trained body. And a smile brimming with self-confidence. And more characteristically than that, unusual peach-coloured hair.

He brushed away Ryner's hand with his right hand.

And in his left hand, he held a strange, inorganic green sphere towards Pueka.

"Gouge out the crystals, **Spunquel.**"

In that instant.

The green sphere appeared to burst open.

The berserk Pueka's voice suddenly stopped.

Like that, she collapsed onto the ground.

"....."

Ryner looked at her.

However, she was no longer moving.

"... That can't be."

Instead, she merely laid on the ground.

Like Lafra.

On the ground...

She was dead...

"....."

The world shook.

Rattling, the world shook.

But he immediately noticed that it was him who was shaking.

In anger, in sorrow, in hatred, in pain, his body shook.

Why?

Why is it always like this?

"....."

Why can't I ever save anyone?

He looked at his outstretched hand.

Unsurprisingly, that hand was shaking.

"You should know this already. The bloodstained hands of a monster like you

can't grasp anything..."

They won't reach anything.

Who can I save like this?

What can the hands of a monster save?

These hands can only do one thing.

With people...

"... Kill them."

They can only hurt people.

"... I'll kill every single one of you."

The man before him laughed, and,

"Haha, what's that? As if the likes of a Cursed Eye monster could kill me..."

But Ryner interrupted him with,

"Gastaaaaaaaark—!"

His hand danced in the sky.

At a speed that eyes couldn't follow, he prepared a magic circle of light.

The man was surprised at that.

"Whoops, you're pretty fast. But..."

He shook his finger. On his finger was a golden ring.

But Ryner had seen something like that before.

It seemed to be the same type of Heroes' Relic that that Froaude guy used.

While Froaude manipulated beasts of shadow, this guy used beasts of lightning. The ring was manipulating the beasts of lightning that killed Lafra in the beginning.

If the ring had the same ability as the beasts that Froaude used, then he couldn't win.

The beasts' movements were too fast and sharp for Ryner to follow.

If he took him on alone, he couldn't win at all.

But that wasn't the case here.

The man spoke.

"Come out, beasts..."

But Ryner completed his magic circle, and,



"WHAT I SEEK IS..."

"Too slow. If I don't cancel out the magic or dodge, I'll die?"

Appear!"

Immediately.

Before Ryner, light formed.

Beasts of lightning appeared.

But Ryner didn't dodge.

Nothing mattered.

Nothing mattered anymore.

As a cursed monster who couldn't save anyone or anything, whether he lived or died didn't matter.

But this guy...

"... THUNDER >>>..."

I'll kill him—!

"IZU..."

However, all of a sudden, as if protecting Ryner from the beasts of lightning, Ferris interrupted and moved in front of him.

"H-Haa!? Why would you... shit... I can't stop the spell..."

But then Luke hurriedly grabbed Ryner's head from behind and pulled him to the ground.

"... Uo!?"

With that, the magic was stopped.

The beasts of lightning attacked Ferris; however, Ferris swung her sword.

At her, Ryner—

"... A-Are you an idiot!? Running right into the middle of magic..."

"You're the idiot—!"

Ferris shouted.

Like that, she turned around.

There, her face was expressionless as usual.

However, that expressionless face—

Faintly, truly faintly,

"... If... If you want to die alone that badly, then go ahead and die."

It distorted in sadness, as if she were about to cry.

Ryner was speechless at that.

Turning that face away from Ryner, she continued.

"... If you're going to be a monster and not my friend... then just go off and disappear. If you won't consider yourself my partner, my manservant, or my tea-drinking companion, then just go off... and do what you want."

She then pointed her sword at the Gastark man.

And,

"... But Ryner, I won't think of you that way. No matter how much you see yourself as a monster... I won't think of you that way. On your own... when you're by yourself... No matter how much you deny how lonely you are when you're by yourself..."

I won't think of you that way."

She said that.

Before her, the Gastark man laughed.

"Wooow, that was pretty grand... If this were a fairy tale, the monster would become human at the very end, and they would all live happily ever after... but as much as I hate to disappoint you, the fact that he's a monster won't change..."

And the man looked at Ryner, speaking.

"He's a monster who harms the world just by being alive."

A monster who harms the world...

"....."

Those were words he was familiar with.

Those things were always being said.

You're a monster.

A monster who can only hurt others.

A monster who can only kill others.

You can't reach anywhere with those bloodstained hands.

You can't save anyone...

Don't try to deny it. If you're a monster who hurts others just by being alive, then go ahead and die already.

Always.

He'd always thought that.

Despite that.

Despite the fact that Ryner had already confirmed that.

Ferris glared at the man ahead, and,

"... So what? So what if he's a monster? I don't care whether he's a monster or not."

The man laughed.

"Oh, you say some pretty amusing things... No, even if you don't care... he's a dangerous monster who..."

However, Ferris interrupted.

"You think I care?"

She easily said.

She said it so easily.

At that, Ryner truly felt like punching himself.

Word after word, she said.

So what if he's a monster?

I don't care whether or not he's a monster.

And at the end, saying "*You think I care?*"...

She threw that out so easily.

Without even thinking at all.

Such a fool

As such a huge fool, Ryner—

"... I-Is..."

For some reason, tears spilled...

"... Is it... okay... for me to live?"

His voice trembled.

At that, he thought *excuse me*.

Showing tears in front of Ferris, after saying that...

But the troubling things didn't stop.

As his unseemly tears continued, he felt like dying.

Ah, this is no good.

I'll die from embarrassment.

If she turns around right now...

But then, at that moment, she turned around.

She was that sort of person.

She was a malicious, violent demon.

Above that...

"....."

She looked his way.

She stared at the crying Ryner...

However, she smiled as if she were about to cry as well, and,

"... Fool. If you died... you know I'd be lonely..."

She said.

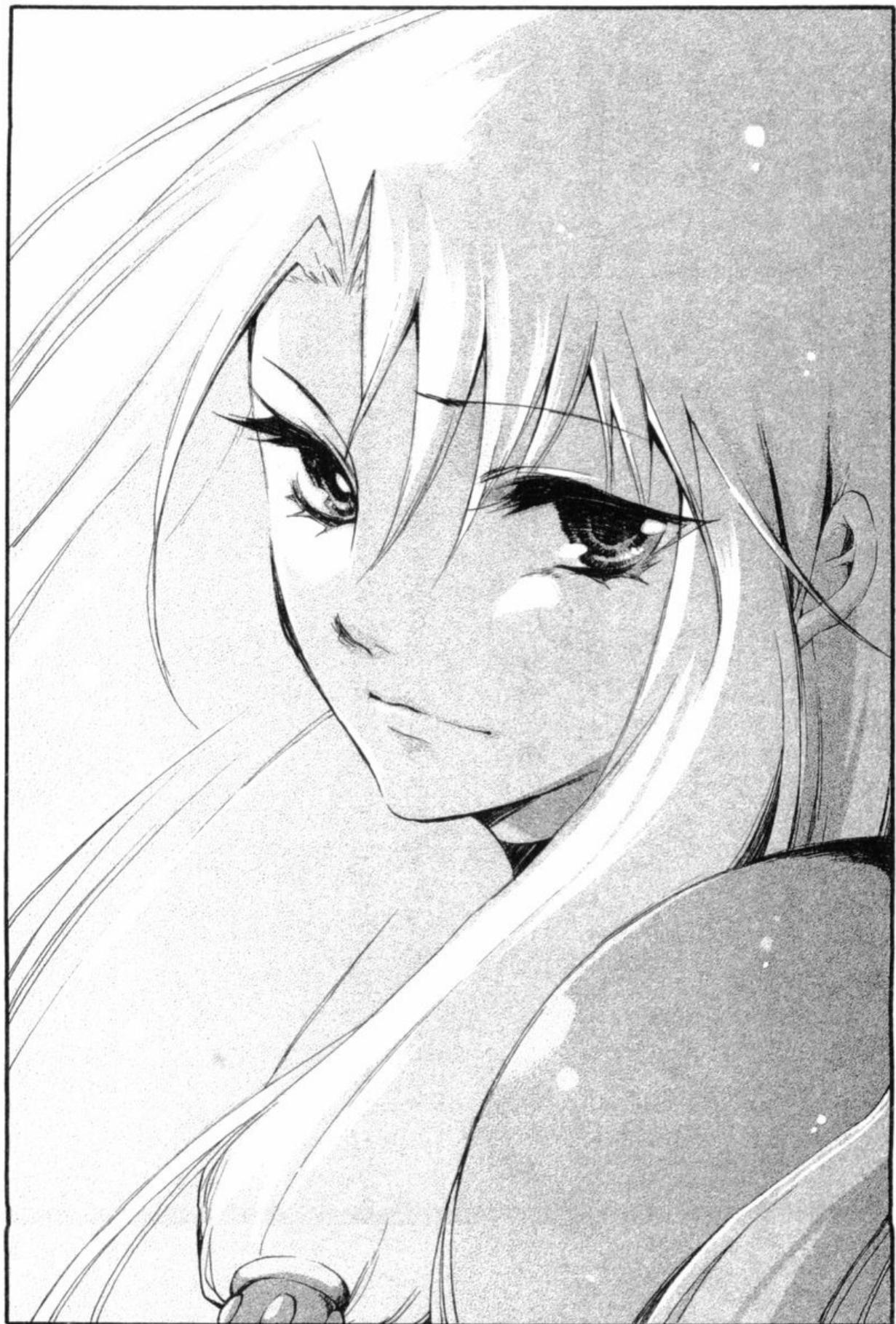
At that, Ryner again lost his words.

A scream.

Inside his heart, a scream echoed.

He didn't want to be alone anymore.

He didn't want to be lonely anymore.



Even if he was scorned, even if he was feared, he didn't want to be alone anymore.

Because I like people.

Because no matter how hurt I am, I...

"I..."

But.

Regarding that, the Gastark man—

"Then, I guess you're going to be lonely pretty soon. After all, he's going to die right here."

Saying that, he thrusted his hand into the green sphere and took out a crystal-like object.

At that, Ryner remembered.

In a previous fight, Sui and Kuu used the same thing.

It was something that caused crystallization so that they could gouge out Cursed Eye bearers' eyes. Furthermore, it was likely Pueka's **Alpha Stigma**.

Looking at that,

"S-Shit,"

Ryner exclaimed.

If that crystal were to be used, the surrounding **Alpha Stigma** bearers would forcibly go berserk.

Ryner looked around.

The children.

He looked at the children who possessed the **Alpha Stigma** and, unable to do anything, were crying.

The man spoke.

"I'll be taking all of your Cursed Eyes."

Ryner called out.

"Y-You guys, run!"

But unsurprisingly, the children didn't move. Instead, they only cried.

Ryner wouldn't be nearly fast enough to take them and get them out of this place.

That was why he turned to Ferris.

If it were her...

Ferris was already running.

But at that.

"Come out, beasts!"

The man swung his ring.

One beast appeared before the children, and furthermore, two more attacked Ferris.

One of them successfully stopped the sword with its fangs, while another, with a growl, seized Ferris's body with its tail.

"... Gah!?"

She was sent flying. Collapsing onto the ground, she lost consciousness.

Looking at that, the man laughed.

"Well? Didn't I say so? That a Cursed Eye monster isn't enough to kill me."

And he held out the crystal.

Ryner couldn't do anything about what was happening before him.

Again...

Again, I can't, not for anyone...

"That's wrong—!"

Ryner shouted.

At himself who was giving up.

At his heart that was causing him to immediately give up.

After all, that wasn't how things should be.

That wasn't how things should be.

This kind of despair.

The world shouldn't be overwhelmed by this kind of despair.

Otherwise, Lafra had died for no reason. If no one could be saved here, then hadn't Lafra died for nothing?

But that was wrong.

That wasn't how things should be.

"What, what can these hands..."

Think.

You've got to think.

I can do something.

I can save someone.

I can't give up yet.

If I keep holding onto hope.

The path will show itself before me.

Who cares about God or the Cursed Eyes!?

I—

At the end of this despair, a world where no one has to lose anything anymore.

Where that child and Kiefer won't cry, Tyle, Toni, and Fahl don't die, Sion can laugh, and Ferris, and Lafra, and everyone, everyone, everyone, everyone, everyone, everyone, everyone!

Then.

All of a sudden, Lafra's face arose in his mind.

Why, he didn't know.

But in this world of despair and on the brink of death, he smiled.

Inside his mind, Lafra spoke.

"That's why I called you here. Because I wanted salvation."

In response, if Ryner recalled correctly, he asked,

"For whom?"

Then Lafra smiled sadly...

"For Tiir."

Immediately.

"....."

Ryner looked towards the cabin.

Just at the entrance, though he shouldn't have been there earlier, Tiir had collapsed.

He was covered in blood.

His right arm and his left foot were torn apart... but it seemed that he'd managed to crawl outside.

But he only made it that far.

He wasn't moving. He didn't even twitch. He'd lost a fatal amount of blood. Without a doubt, he was going to die like that.

"....."

But upon seeing that, a smile broke out across Ryner's face.

Like that, his hand began to dance through the air.

Faster than others, more accurately than others, he engraved light into the air.

In that instant, he completed a complex magic circle...

At that,

"It's pointless to struggle. But I'll end it here,"

He held out the crystal.

The crystal that was able to forcibly cause **Alpha Stigma** bearers to go

berserk.

And,

"Resonate."

In that moment.

Ryner's hand that had been moving so quickly halted.

His vision was clouded with white. Even in his thoughts, there was nothing but white.

His eyes opening wide, pain began to burn in their centers.

"... U, e... enough..."

His consciousness was fading.

His consciousness was fading.

And then all the meaningless matters began.

Life.

Death.

Joy.

Sorrow.

All of those meaningless matters began...

Shut up, you.

Don't resist it. You wish for it. No matter how the world fills with despair, none of it matters to you...

I said to shut up...

None of it is important to you.

You're wrong.

You care about nothing.

You're wrong!

He heard distant voices.

The voices of the children.

"Ah, aaah,aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah—!?"

I have to save them...

You feel nothing.

Shut up.

You feel nothing.

Shut up!

No matter who dies, you feel nothing.

Damn... it...

Ha, hahaha.

Now, let it disappear.

Everything.

And you feel nothing.

S-Sto...

Let your consciousness turn to white.

Ah...

Be at ease.

Nothing matters.

The world became bright white.

White, white, with nothing in the world.

In the center, however, there was only the sensation of coldness.

Rapidly, rapidly his consciousness grew cold.

And then, the structure of everything in the world spread across his vision.

Numbers, graphs, patterns.

It was if he held his hand out and grasped everything in the world.

And he heard a voice.

Come, let us bring it to an end.

Everything. Yours to toy with. Release it. Open up. Kill. Everything.

All of what he saw through his eyes disappeared...

"Ah... ahhh..."

Ryner's entire body trembled.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, this damn bastard, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh—!?"

He shouted.

There was a great pain in his head.

His body convulsed.

Nevertheless...

The world was no longer white.

He returned.

Before his eyes, the magic circle he was drawing...

Furthermore, the man had a surprised expression.

"N-No way... you stopped the crystallization? Impossible. What the hell are you?"

A smile arose in Ryner's face at that as he answered.

"... A monster!"

And again, he began drawing a magic circle.

At that,

"No, you don't!"

The man tried to raise his hand.

However, he couldn't lift that arm. Wrapped around his arm from some point ago were several strings of light...

The man scowled.

"... The Latsel Thread?"

From behind Ryner, Luke spoke.

"Hoh. Is that its name? This is... Well, it's like that. Then, if you know its name, you should know what it can do."

"It's normally meant for sewing."

"Ah, that's what I thought. But still, you'll be killed by this tool meant for sewing. I'll deliver your head to Gastark."

Luke smiled darkly.

"... All of you from Gastark will learn just what it means to pick a fight with Roland."

To that.

The Gastark assassin also smiled. Again, he held out the green sphere.

"Idiot. Like you could kill me with such an inferior **Rhule Fragmei. Spunquel**, tear apart the threads."

At the order, the green sphere glowed. And the surrounding threads were torn apart...

But at that, Ryner smiled.

He looked entirely around some time ago.

Puzzled by Luke's words, he'd forgotten the most important thing.

The Gastark assassin had made a mistake.

Rather than focus on Luke, he should've taken down Ryner from the very beginning.

If he'd done so, it would all be over.

But that wasn't the case.

Completing the magic circle...

"WHAT I SEEK IS THUNDER >>> IZUCHI!"

Ryner called.

From the center of the magic circle, a light gathered and a flash of lightning was born. And immediately, he fired it at Tiir.

A voice could be heard.

A weak, hoarse voice.

"I consume power..."

At the same time.

The magic Ryner released vanished.

Tiir's eyes absorbed it.

In that his instant, his body pulsed.

And his arm and foot started to heal.

He sprang up.

Leaping up and landing on the roof of the house, Tiir glared at the man.

"How dare you... h-human. I'll kill you..."

"Now's not the time, Tiir!"

Ryner shouted. Tiir looked his way, and,

"Eh? R-Ryner... what...?"

"The children! Stop the children! Their **Alpha Stigma** has gone berserk!"

At that, as Tiir turned towards them, he made a shocked expression.

"So, do you understand the situation!?"

As Ryner instinctively retorted that, Tiir was already moving towards the three children who were laughing madly...

With speed that couldn't be followed, he struck them with his hand.

The children lost consciousness, collapsing onto the ground.

But they couldn't relax yet.

"The other children in the house..."

But at that, the man spoke.

"I've already killed them."

"Wha—"

Ryner looked at the man.

"... You."

The man had a troubled expression.

"However, this time, I give up. This is too much trouble... Tiir was a nuisance in the beginning, and though the crystallization was supposed to kill everyone... this time, it was stopped... In the end, my entire harvest is one crystal, huh?"

Saying that, the crystal from before...

He looked from Pueka's eyes to this way.

His harvest was one crystal...

That was what he said.

To kill a girl who was screaming and crying out... his harvest of one crystal.

"....."

What did one say to that?

That it was a person he killed?

Despite that, regarding something like that, why did that guy smile?

Ryner's mind was filled with anger.

He saw blots of black.

But Ryner shut out his anger.

In this situation, it was no good.

In this situation, it couldn't save anyone...

"....."

Ryner stared at the man.

"In the end, my entire harvest is one crystal", he said.

In other words... he couldn't retrieve the **Alpha Stigma** without killing them?

Ryner thought about it calmly.

In this situation, what would be the best plan?

Taking in a breath, he surveyed his surroundings.

And, a way to save as many people as he could by himself...

"....."

Ryner looked at Tiir.

He had a painful look on his face.

With that, Ryner understood.

Perhaps Tiir had fought with the man.

And he knew.

If he fought him, he wouldn't win. Otherwise, he surely would've rushed in and attacked the man.

It was obvious logic. If this man was the only human here, then it could be simple.

Then, what to do?

What would work out?

Ryner thought about it for a few moments.

"... Tiir. Take the children and escape."

He said.

The man laughed.

"You're planning on running away..."

"Yeah, they'll be escaping. I'll be facing off with you."

"... You? That's an unnecessary sentiment. Though I'll be taking your **Alpha Stigma**..."

Ryner smiled scornfully.

"That's a lie. You've noticed that my eyes aren't your normal **Alpha Stigma**, right? And you people from Gastark seem to thirst for that kind of information."

As he said that.

The man looked at Ryner's eyes.

What rested in Ryner's eyes, the pentagrams—he looked at the symbols, before looking over in Tiir's direction. Then behind Ryner. Then in Luke's direction.

The meaning of that wasn't immediately clear.

But then immediately,

"You're not enough. More than that, I can still kill one **Alpha Stigma**."

Saying that, he again held out the green sphere...

Ryner knew what the man wanted to convey.

Ryner forcibly grabbed the man's arm.

"Tiir! Take the children and hurry up and escape!"

"However, you..."

"Hurry! Don't you realize that at this rate, everyone's going to die!?"

"Da..."

At that, Tiir moved. He held the children and then ran away from that place...

In the thicket, his figure disappeared.

To that,

"I won't let you escape. **Spunquel**... damn it. They got away... Ah, well, it's fine. In this case, I'll just kill your companions."

The man said, before once again holding the green sphere towards them...

He looked at Luke.

However, Luke was smiling.

The man stared at that smiling face, as if Luke wasn't concerned about the situation at all.

"... So, you're saying that you've exposed our shoddy performance?"

The man asked.

After laughing gently, Luke—

"No, no, it truly was a believable performance. After all, Tiir, as he was called, was fooled and so took his leave."

That is, when the man directed his attention only to Ryner, it was a sign.

There's something I have to deal with regarding you... Their conversation couldn't afford to be heard by Luke or Tiir. That was why they were kept at a distance.

But the situation had been completely revealed by Luke.

The man spoke to Luke.

"So what are you going to do?"

"... Leave, I suppose? Unless I'm able to participate in this secret conversation of yours..."

"Nope."

"Then I'll leave. After all, I can't say that our fight just now was my victory. Well, that can't be read from only one or two blows..."

Saying that, Luke smiled. With his eternally disconnected smile, he turned on his heel.

"But we'll see next time."

Towards Luke's defenceless back, the man held out his hand with the golden ring on his finger.

However, he frowned.

Luke's back.

There, without anyone noticing, threads were stretched about.

"... Next time on the battlefield, huh? Well, until then, give my regards to Roland's king."

Luke didn't turn around at that, instead waving a hand.

"And mine to Gastark's king."

With that, he disappeared into the grass.

Confirming that, the man looked at Ryner again.

"... Geez, what was that? Roland's nothing but a bunch of monsters. Like that guy with the king who could disappear and reappear as if he were some kind of ghost..."

"Wha... So you and Lucile have..."

Ryner's words stopped there.

And then he sighed wearily.

Suddenly, for some reason, he remembered an old name he was once called by...

The Greatest Magician in Roland.

"... Who's the greatest?"

He groaned in a self-deprecating manner.

At that, the man—

"What was that?"

"No, it's something else."

"Huh? ... Well, if it's not important... So, to continue the conversation from before..."

He said, before stopping.

"No, before that, I should probably introduce myself? I'm Lir Orla. You can just call me Lir, Ryner."

"Don't call me by my name like that,"

Ryner said, to which Lir scowled.

"Ah? Are you saying that you're above me? I've got a hostage right here, and yet you'd look down on me?"

He said, waving his finger.

Just a short distance from where the fallen Ferris lay, beasts of lightning with large fangs appeared...

"Ah, hey, wait, seriously? Wait. That was my bad."

"Exactly? Don't you think you should understand your position a little better?
All right, then say it. Lir-sama."

"Haa!? Didn't you just say that I could call you..."

Before Ryner could finish, Lir began to wave his finger...

"No way, no way, no way! Lir-sama, Lir-sama! Damn it—!"

"Well, putting that joke aside... Start talking. **Alpha Stigma** monster..."

But then, he seemed like he was contemplating something, before—

"... No, maybe it's better to call you the **Solver of All Equations** instead?"

Lir called Ryner that.

Solver of All Equations.

He said something Ryner had never heard of.

Ryner narrowed his eyes, looking at Lir.

"... Is that the name of my eyes?"

But at that, Lir looked surprised.

"Huh? Don't tell me that you don't even know about yourself?"

At those words, Ryner thought for a moment before replying.

About himself.

He didn't know about himself?

If that was the case, he didn't know how to respond.

On the contrary, what the hell was he? He'd gone with Tiir in order to learn that.

But Lir called Ryner the **Solver of All Equations**.

Not an **Alpha Stigma** bearer, but the **Solver of All Equations**.

What in the world...

"I... What the hell am I?"

He asked such a idiotic-sounding question.

However, Lir laughed at that.

"Isn't this rich? In all seriousness... you really don't know about yourself?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking."

In response, Lir's smile became increasingly cheerful.

"Then, the gate too?"

"Gate?"

"The key?"

"....."

Ryner stopped talking.

But it was too late.

A smile arose in Lir's face.

"... Ah, ahahaha... So that's how it is. In the end, Roland's only reached that degree so far?"

He quickly turned on his heel.

At that, Ryner—

"Eh, ah, hey... Weren't you going to take me back to Gastark?"

Lir simply shook his head.

"Nope. That won't be necessary. No, rather, if you stay here, then for us, that'll really be..."

His words stopped there.

He looked over his shoulder.

He smiled at Ryner as if Ryner were a complete idiot.

"... Well, since you haven't been betrayed yet, work as hard as you can, crazed

monster."

Saying that, he disappeared into the grass.

"Asshole, get back here. What the hell were you talking about..."

Ryner began to follow him...

However.

He stopped.

Then, he turned around.

There, only Ryner stood.

The sky began to faintly turn bright, as morning approached.

Over there, darkness stretched.

It was terribly, terribly quiet.

The only thing that could be heard was the sound of the wind.

The sound of the wind gently blowing through the grass.

"....."

However, the children's sleeping breaths couldn't be heard anymore.

Ryner looked at the fallen boy and girl on the ground.

Lafra and Pueka's bodies.

And he remembered.

Lafra's sad smile, and Pueka's cheerful face as she looked at Lafra.

And then the four people who should've been inside that small building.

Even though they were all smiling before.

Even though they'd been smiling happily.

There was no longer anything.

"... At least, a grave..."

Ryner murmured.

What the **Solver of All Equations** meant didn't matter anymore.

Ryner approached the fallen Ferris.

He looked at her.

Her eyes were closed.

She was still unconscious.

Crouching down, he confirmed her current state.

Her breathing was stable, and she didn't seem to have sustained any serious damage.

It didn't look like any bones were broken.

Ryner let out a sigh of relief at that.

And then,

"....."

Looking at her narrow body and arms—he was amazed that such a slight body took a hit from the beasts of lightning for him.

Even now, he couldn't help but be afraid to think of what he'd do if she'd died...

He'd noticed it for the first time.

Ferris's feelings at that time.

The words she'd spoken with a face like she was about to cry.

"... Fool. If you died... you know I'd be lonely..."

To that, Ryner—

"... Yeah. Same here. If you died, I'd be lonely as well..."

And then, as he moved to fix her messy hair,

"... Don't touch me, sex fiend,"

Ferris said in a voice that suggested she was trying to endure the pain.

"Wait, so you were awake?"

As her expression warped into one of pain, she replied,

"... No, I woke up just now. What's the situation?"

She scanned the surroundings.

To that, Ryner shrugged.

"... Ah, well, I'm not really sure. But we drove away Lir... that guy from Gastark..."

Ferris looked behind Ryner.

She looked at Lafra and Pueka's bodies. Then, she confirmed that Luke and Tiir weren't there.

For some reason, when she spoke, her voice was different from her perpetually emotionless state—there was a hint of unease in it.

"... So, what are you going to do from here?"

She asked that sort of thing.

Reflexively, Ryner smiled wryly.

She was uneasy about something?

Something could make her, of all people, uneasy?

"... I really am an idiot,"

Ryner said, groaning.

As usual, Ferris—

"... Mm-hmm. Though you didn't start being an idiot just now."

But her voice was still anxious...

He felt like crying.

I really am a complete idiot.

Even though he'd had so much for so long.

He was the one who rejected it.

Because he was afraid of hurting others.

Because he was afraid of being hurt.

That was why he ran—so he could be alone.

But no matter how much he ran, he couldn't get used to it.

No matter how much he despaired.

No matter how much he despaired, alone in this world.

As miserable as his heart was... it wasn't overwhelmed by despair.

As long as Sion and Ferris were smiling...

Like that, he felt happy.

As he smiled, tears threatened to spill.

I'm... not alone anymore.

He thought.

In that case.

"... I'll do it, Lafra. I'll fulfill my promise to you."

And he remembered Lafra's words. His sad expression.

Even so, he'd entrusted something to the hopeless Ryner.

"For the sad bearers of God's Eyes, who have lost faith in humans... I want you to save them all."

Ryner looked at Ferris.

She stared back with a nervous face.

Looking at her—

"... Let's go back to Roland. There's something I need to do. Before that, though, there's something I want you to promise me."

"... Promise?"

"Yeah. A promise. So that I'll have the courage to fight against my cowardice... I want you to do something for me."

At those words, Ferris tilted her head with a clueless look.

"... What in the world are you talking about...?"

Ryner interrupted her.

"... I've... been running away all this time. All this time, I've fled from the truth of being a monster. Of how I might hurt the people important to me. Of how I might kill the people important to me... like Sion and you... So I ran away from Roland. Because I thought that I couldn't be by your side."

"... But do you think differently now?"

However, at that, Ryner frowned and shrugged.

"... No... it's not so easy to change the way you think. I'm still afraid. That by being by your side, I could kill you... I'm scared of that. That's why... That's why I want you to give me courage."

"... Courage?"

Ryner nodded.

Right—courage.

But it would be the worst sort of promise.

One that Ferris would hate—the worst promise.

Nevertheless, he'd decided not to run away anymore.

And so.

Ryner stared at Ferris, and—

"... I want you to kill me. If I go berserk again... I want you to be the one to kill me. Without hesitating like before..."

At that.

Ferris's expression changed.

As expected, it was a faint change. If it were anyone else, they wouldn't be able to tell what she was thinking.

But Ryner understood.

Her feelings.

What she was thinking about right now.

And then Ferris spoke.

As he thought, her tone was indifferent, devoid of any emotions.

"... And with that, you'll return to Roland,"

She said.

And so the promise was made.

At that,

"... Let's go back to Roland... together."

Averting his eyes, Ryner said.

Epilogue 2: A structure overwhelmed by despair

It was the bottom of deep darkness.

Darker, deeper than that darkness... a greater malice spoke.

"You advance forward only on the correct path. You're strong enough to even be able to trample over everything important to you, if you deemed it necessary. Friends. Loved ones. Everything. That is your nature alone. Now then, show me. The correct path..."

The malice continued to speak.

"Show me the path you will walk."

"....."

At that, Sion let out a light breath.

And again he tried to breathe in, but air wouldn't enter.

His breathing.

The air...

Instead, the only thing that entered was darkness.

"....."

Sion directed his gaze to the scattered documents on the floor.

Those were all the documents yielded by Luke Stokkart.

In those documents, matters regarding Ryner were written.

Ryner had made contact with a spy from Gastark.

However, rather than go there, it seemed he was returning to Roland.

It appeared that other Cursed Eye bearers were gathering together as a force, in which case Ryner could potentially become a mediator between them and Roland—that was the proposal Luke was establishing.

If they were able to join hands with the Cursed Eye bearers' force, they would have an advantage if they went to war with Gastark, etc.

"....."

But such things had no meaning.

Whether Ryner could be of use or whether he couldn't.

None of those had any meaning.

"....."

If there was a meaning, it was only in his eyes.

His...

Only in the **Solver of All Equations**.

That, Sion knew.

That, Sion...

"... I—"

That was why he gave out the orders to kill him.

Because it was necessary.

But,

"... I... I won't kill Ryner."

Then, before him.

Sinking in the bottom of the darkness, a figure appeared.

Golden hair. Closed eyes. And unbelievable beauty.

Lucile Eris.

He gazed this way, and,

"... That is your chosen path?"

"It is."

"You will not kill Ryner Lute?"

"Correct."

Sion nodded.

However, in response, Lucile unsurprisingly laughed.

"... Fu, fufufu... as expected, Sion, you're magnificent... I see. Then, you've chosen an even crueler path."

"....."

Sion didn't respond.

But Lucile's voice continued.

"... As Ryner is an important friend to you, I thought it would've been kinder for him to be killed as soon as possible... but it seems you've decided to walk down a thorny path."

"....."

Sion didn't respond.

"But are you truly all right with this? If you kill *that*, a replacement will immediately be born. Together with you. The same cogwheels of this world. Rather than sacrifice a friend..."

"....."

Sion didn't respond.

At that, Lucile seemed satisfied, and smiled faintly.

"... Fu, fufu, well, it's fine. I pray that you don't regret it, my... my hero."

And he vanished.

Darkness returned to the world once more.

Sion stared into that darkness...

"....."

But unsurprisingly, he said nothing.

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